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German Gus, the Go-Lightly Detective.



WITH PATIENCE GERMAN GUS LEANED AGAINST THE MANTEL-PIECE, AWAITING THE PLEASURE OF HIS ODLY-ACTING ACQUAINTANCE.

German Gus,

THE GO-LIGHTLY DETECTIVE;

OR,

The Clew of the Thumbless Hand.

The Romance of the Last Baroness.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD SOBERSIDES," "WHITE-HORSE
WHEELER," "OLD '49," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOILING THE NIGHT BIRDS.

"HAIL-LO! Dot's more droubles for somebody, ain't it?"

Gustave Lucksinger was strolling leisurely along one of Chicago's semi-retired streets, his brain busied over an intricate problem, the solution of which was destined to create a sensation in "The Windy City by the Lake."

For the moment he was lost to all else, his movements being purely mechanical, and when that deep reverie was broken by warlike sounds, the keen glance he flashed around failed to give him his exact location.

There was no moon, but the cloudless sky was filled with twinkling stars, and the street lamps were burning brightly, lending their aid to the young athlete whose nerves were quivering for action as he looked and listened, seeking to locate those sounds.

That took but a second or two, and without stopping to count the possible cost, German Gus sprang forward, knowing that a fellow-being was doing sturdy battle for his life only a few yards around the nearest corner.

There they were: a party of thugs, doing their level best to down their chosen victim, and even in that critical moment, Gustave Lucksinger paused a bit to admire such magnificent doing.

Four against one, with all the advantage of a surprise and an assault from cover! Yet that one had not only rallied from the first shock, but had scattered his assailants sufficiently to regain his foothold, and now was actually carrying war into Africa!

"Playing a brace game, are ye?" was his sturdy challenge as he lurched here and there, striking out with practiced skill, backed up by more than ordinary power of muscle. "All right! Both ends against the middle, and I'm betting odds you'll earn more'n you'll clean-up, this rifle!"

Nor were the threats and defiance all on one side, for as Lucksinger paused to take in the scene at a glance, a shrill-pitched voice broke out in vicious execration, then giving the savage order:

"Down 'im, mates! Cut 'is bloody lights hout, hif—now! Hall together, lads!"

All this German Gus saw and heard during his brief pause at the corner, but he waited for no more. He knew that one man was doing hard battle for his life again: heavy odds, and that was sufficient to send him to the rescue, blood warming up and every nerve a tingle.

"Wait a leedle, you vellers!" he cried, as he charged. "I likes me some fun, too! Here I comes, head vay up und dail a-glimbing!"

And with these words Gus gave a shrill blast on his police-whistle, then let it drop unheeded, for his fists were hungry for work.

None too soon was his coming, either.

That shrill-pitched cry came from a leader, and the four thugs united in an assault before which their victim went down despite his skill and strength.

But with him went two of his enemies, crushed nearly helpless by those muscular arms. A third rascal was reeling blindly back from a blow, while the fourth, an active knave, was hovering over that writhing mass, looking for an opening through which he might deal a finishing blow.

Thus it was a trilling blast rung out on the night-air, and so eager had those bloodhounds been in their death-hunt that this was their first intimation of coming interference.

"The Bobbies!" cried the leader, startled by that significant sound. "'Ware hawks, mates! Don't—Down 'im, I tell ye, fools!"

He had only himself to blame, for that involuntary cry of warning alarmed the thugs, causing them to hesitate—an opportunity which the brave fellow did not neglect, for suddenly one of the thugs rose clear of the mix, turning over in air from a powerful kick, while another rolled along the pavement to the gutter.

His muscular arms were grappling with the third ruffian, and while they were thus closely engaged, the fourth member of the party sprung to closer quarters, striking venomously with his knife as he came.

"Take it, blast ye!" he cried; "go tell your master that!"

All this during the half-dozen seconds it took Gustave Lucksinger to cover those rods of space; then one of the thugs was knocked endlong, his head striking the knifeman near his belt, knock-

ing him backward and sending the blood-stained weapon flying out of his hand, to fall upon the stones with a clear clink.

"Four by von vhas fit vor hocks only!" cried German Gus. "Here I vhas! Come und see me, you vellers!"

He made another rush, this time at the knifeman, but his foot caught against the fellow who had gone down before his stroke, and by the time he could recover his balance two of the thugs were in full flight; then that death-grapple was broken, and one of the two, staggering to his feet, cried—

"Up again, ye double-bankers! When ye cut my comb—Here's at ye, Johnny!"

And he came with a rush, but Lucksinger nimbly evaded the half-blind charge, crying out in sharp tones:

"Not me! Fight your enemies, man, dear!"

"Man to man, or a dozen in a heap, what's the odds?" recklessly cried the big fellow, dashing one hand across his eyes as though his vision was impaired, but with his other arm up as a guard.

Gustave made another dodge as the fellow who had fallen at his first stroke, gave a hasty scramble, but no further fight was in the knave, and he had thoughts only for escaping while he might.

The sharp strokes of a night-club was echoing along the street, and instantly recognizing its meaning, German Gus called forth:

"This way, officer! Better late than never, but—steady, sir!"

The victim of that deadly assault was in the act of leaping upon the stranger who had come to his rescue, but paused at those words.

"You're not—where've they gone, then?"

"Melted away, all save the one you laid out so—quiet, fellow!" as the prostrate thing gave a stir, as though about to arise.

"Don't strike! I'm cut!" groaned the wretch, huskily. "Cut!—I'm a dead man!"

Before more could be said or done, a uniformed figure came running up, displaying a revolver as he cried:

"Hands up, ye bloody devils, ye! Be aisy, now, or I'll lay ye out for a wake, bedad, thin!"

His pistol was swinging from side to side, trying to keep both men covered at the same time, and his long night-club was repeating its call for assistance, lustily thumping the stone curbing, sending its echoes far and wide.

Lucksinger gave a laugh, but he knew what might be expected from an excitable policeman, and so hastened to declare:

"We're all right, officer. This gentleman was assaulted by thugs, and I only came to his assistance, so—"

"Howld up yer paws, thin, ye devils! Whisper the wink av an oye, aven, an' I'll blow a main sewer clane t'rough ye both, faith!"

"Get out, ye Patlander!" indignantly began the big stranger; but German Gus was more politic, and hastily turned back the breast of his coat, letting the nearest lamplight fall upon a metal badge pinned over his heart.

"Let this talk, then, if words won't suffice, officer," he said, quickly. "My name is Lucksinger, and—"

"German Gus, is it, thin?"

"Dot's what I vhas galled, sometimes, mein friendt," answered the detective, deftly altering his manner to suit that sobriquet, then, casting a keen glance upon the second officer who just then came running up, ready for hot work if necessary. "Hallo, Inglesant!"

"Lucksinger?"

"Unless I was changed at nurse," laughingly added the detective. "Are you willing to go my bail with your mate, here? He insists on holding me up, and, really, I begin to doubt my own identity!"

"The gentleman's clean white, Moriarty," declared Inglesant. "He's not on the force, but, that's the force's loss, for a better detective never struck a scent on either side of the Big Drink!"

The Irish member began to apologize, but German Gus cut his words short. Three of the thugs had vanished, but the one remaining was moaning like one sorely injured, and Lucksinger suggested that attention be given his needs at once.

A hasty examination disclosed a deep wound in the breast. Blood was flowing freely, and tiny air-bubbles told that the lungs had almost surely been penetrated by that savage thrust.

"Who cut you, man?" asked Inglesant, as he knelt beside the wounded fellow, after having sent Moriarty off to send in a call for an ambulance.

Only a husky groan answered him from that quarter, but the stranger volunteered the information:

"One of his pards, sir. Reckon 'twas meant for my carcass, but I'm a heap sight better satisfied to have it this way!"

Inglesant cast a keen, suspicious glance that way, but said nothing just then. His trained fingers were trying to check that effusion of blood for the time being.

Lucksinger noticed that glance, and quietly explained: the gentleman had been assailed by four ruffians, and this particular one had re-

ceived his injury during the struggle. Even if the stranger had cut him, he would be held guiltless, on the plea of self-defense.

"Which I didn't, though," bluntly declared the stranger. "I hadn't so much as a toothpick handy, though I'll never again go unheeled, if the good Lord'll forgive me for being so careless this time!"

"It was over so sudden that I missed spotting either of the other rascals, Inglesant, but perhaps we can pinch the truth out of this fellow. Have him taken to the station, and cared for. I'll drop around in the morning, to see how he's getting along."

The officer rose to his feet, as his mate came back from sending in the call. He looked gravely at the stranger, then slowly spoke:

"That's all right, so far as you're concerned, Mr. Lucksinger. I know you, but this gentleman is—"

"Austin McRustie, sir," politely interjected that personage, with a bow too profound not to have a touch of sarcasm in it. "I'm staying at the Pacific, for the present."

"Oh, he's all right, Inglesant," quickly declared German Gus. "I'll go his bail, if you think it necessary."

That was enough, and the officer quickly declared as much.

"Don't mention it, sir! If you're his friend—"

"A friend in need, at all events," laughingly declared McRustie, gripping the detective's hand and shaking it cordially. "Only for you, sir, I reckon I'd have cashed in my checks right here and now!"

"Hardly, if you kept up your strike, sir. I was almost sorry to interfere, you were enjoying yourself so hugely!"

McRustie laughed again, smoothing down his ruffled plumage as best he might by that dim light.

"Well, it did seem a bit like good old times, such as a fellow finds out in the wild and woolly West," he admitted, lightly. "Still, four on one is long odds, especially when that lonesome fellow is jumped from the rear, and is fool enough to leave his tools at home. So, I'm yours to command, Mr. Lucksinger, from this hour to the final turning of the box!"

"Don't mention it, my dear sir," bowed the detective, then turning in the direction from whence came the clatter of hoofs and rumbling of wheels.

This heralded the coming of the police ambulance, and in another minute a police surgeon was caring for the wounded man, giving his hurt a preliminary inspection, then reporting:

"A nasty cut; but I reckon he'll stand the trip. Pass out the litter, will you, Moriarty?"

Lingering only long enough to see the injured ruffian lifted into the ambulance, Gustave Lucksinger again promised to drop around in the morning to see how the fellow fared and to attend to necessary details, then turned toward Austin McRustie, who had kept close to his elbow ever since their introduction.

"Can I be of further service to you, my dear sir?" he asked politely. "If a stranger, as I inferred from your words a bit ago, shall I see you safely back to your hotel?"

McRustie took his arm, and for a few rods they walked in silence.

"You are really a detective, then?" he asked after awhile.

"Something of one, yes," replied Lucksinger.

"Then you're just the man I've been hunting for!" declared McRustie.

CHAPTER II.

A CLIENT FOR GERMAN GUS.

THEY were turning the corner, where stood a street-lamp, and with a barely perceptible movement of the arm which the big fellow had accepted, his face was brought into clearer view than at any time since their first meeting—barely long enough for a single glance, but in that brief inspection German Gus had fairly summed his man up.

Almost surely a free-lance, or a human rolling-stone, yet one who was not unversed in city life, for all that—a man who exceeded the six-foot standard by fully two inches, with a massively built figure to correspond, and a face whose strong features expressed honesty, if nothing more.

Minor details were left for another time, but this much the keen eyes of the German took in with that single glance so quickly that he felt a touch of chagrin when the stranger dryly observed:

"Not so terrible much for handsome, pardner, but what there is of it is all my own. Shall I strike a posh, eh?"

"Not on my account, sir," answered Lucksinger. "I was looking for the point of your joke."

"Now you have got me, pardner! Of course I hear what you say, but, as for understanding what you mean, bless my boot-heels if I can call the turn to save me!"

"Did'n you say you'd been looking for me, M.: McRustie?"

"Oh! is that it, then?" with a sudden brightening of the face. "And devil a lie is all that,

thin, as Moriarty might tell ye! Unless you have been having your little joke, as well."

It was his turn to peer into the face of his newly-formed acquaintance.

"I say, pardner," he abruptly added. "My name's Austin McRustie. I am lately in from the mining-country, looking for a lead which I've sworn to find and work out before I cash my checks."

"You came pretty near doing that this evening, my friend."

"An inch of a miss, and all the rest of it," with a careless outflinging of his free hand. "I don't value life very highly."

"I should say not, from the manner in which you played with those fellows back yonder."

"Oh, of course I couldn't lie down and let 'em stamp me out, rough-shod, without doing a share of the kicking, you know. And then—I say, pardner?" with a hesitating cadence.

"Well, my friend?"

"It wasn't all guff you dealt out to those cops back there?"

"When I offered to stand your guarantee?"

"Well, that, and then your badge—you really are an officer?"

"I have a right to wear this badge, yes, my dear sir."

"And you are?—"

"Gustave Lucksinger, sometimes called German Gus, when my tongue becomes tangled up with excitement and the English language," smilingly admitted the younger man.

"And you really are a detective, sir?"

"I really am—yes," bowed the other, more gravely.

"Now we're getting down to bed-rock!" cried McRustie, with a long-drawn breath. "I've got a job—a tough job for you to tackle, and you can name your own figures, too. Will you take it, pardner?"

His free hand dove into a pocket, as though in quest of an instant retainer, but German Gus as quickly interposed, with the words:

"Wait, please, until I hear just what sort of job it is, Mr. McRustie. Time enough then to talk about terms, etcetera."

"That's white enough for a hog!" bluntly exploded the excited man from the mines, yet seemingly willing enough to listen to reason. "There's big money in it, if you can—when you take hold of it, I mean."

Lucksinger turned to squarely face the speaker, and for a few moments their eyes met frankly. If there was anything crooked lying back of this abrupt offer, the Western man was cunning enough to hide it, and the German spoke again:

"You are in earnest, or those eyes lie. The least I can do is to hear what you desire, so—shall we go to your hotel, or stop at my lodgings?"

"I room at the Pacific. Which lay-out comes handiest, pardner?"

"My chambers are nearest, but—"

"That's good enough for me, if you don't object, Lucksinger."

"Why should I object," with a peculiar laugh. "Vhas you nod offering me employmen, nein?"

This change came so suddenly that McRustie could not help laughing in his turn, and without further speech, the German detective quickened his pace, the big fellow striding easily along by his side, apparently nothing the worse for his recent tough battle for life with some of Chicago's worst night-birds.

Both men seemed well content to await a more favorable opportunity for speech, and precious few were the words they let drop while proceeding to the lodgings which Gustave Lucksinger had taken for himself.

These were in a quiet street, where no bustle prevailed at that hour of the night, and opening the front door with a latch-key, German Gus led his newly-formed acquaintance up a flight of steps, bidding him stand still while he struck a light.

The flicker of a match quickly produced a more stable light, and, as Austin McRustie flashed a keen glance around, he saw that the young detective was pretty comfortably situated, so far as that apartment indicated.

For the first time, too, they obtained a fair view of each other, and made no bones about improving that opportunity.

McRustie was dressed in garments of fine material, but of rather too pronounced colors for perfect good taste, while his display of costly jewelry was excessive. From the crown of his soft felt hat, to the soles of his high-heeled patent-leathers, he looked "the sport" to perfection.

His heavy mustache and whiskers were richly auburn in hue, with here and there a thread of silver. His strong face bore lines of care, rather than the footprints of time, as German Gus decided.

The contrast was strong between them, and something like disappointment came into the face of the elder as he scanned his new friend.

In form well-built, lithe and muscular, his movements betraying a store of strength which many a larger man might well have envied him, Gustave Lucksinger looked but little more than an overgrown youth, just then.

His face was smooth and boyish, and at first glance one would hardly have placed him beyond his teens, an estimate which his garments went far toward confirming; a loosely-fitting sack-coat, a narrow-rimmed hat, a tieless collar which left his white throat bare, with canvas shoes on his feet.

A smudge of dirt, a blotch of blood, both marking his face, did not add age to his years, and it was with a boyish laugh that he turned from McRustie to take a view of himself in the mirror above the mantel.

"Mein cracious! whill you schust look py dot vace!" he exploded, with strengthening laugh. "Uff Katrine vhas see me now, she vould undo me sphrecken: 'Go vash dy vace, und soak dot headt, leetle poj!'"

McRustie had given a start as he noticed the blood, and now quickly uttered:

"I say, pardner, you're not hurt—really?"

"By mein good-looks only: can you imatchine dose, vonce?" jestingly asked the young detective, making a wry grimace at his reflection in the mirror above the grate.

"That's better!" with a breath of evident relief, at the same time glancing over his own apparel, where both dirt and blood-stains were perceptible by the gaslight. "I didn't know but that pesky critter gave you a taste of his steel while about it."

Lucksinger repeated his assurance that no harm had come to his person, then excused himself long enough to renovate his appearance.

On his return, he found McRustie making himself very much at home, leaning back in one chair, with his feet resting upon another, placidly puffing away at a cigar, and dusting his checked trowsers with his ebony cane.

"Dot's what I likes me to see, good friendt," declared Lucksinger, smiling broadly as he moved toward the mantel-piece, where a black marble clock was busily ticking away the seconds, in company with a huge meerschaum pipe, a Rhine-wine glass, and a curiously-carved casket of polished ivory. "Home vhas wherever you goes, ain'dt it?"

"And a right smart little home it is, too," declared McRustie, with an approving glance around them. "Opera, turf, prize-ring! You're a man after my own heart, pardner—shake!"

German Gus complied, and their strong fingers closed over each other with what seemed hearty goodwill. McRustie offered his cigar-case, but it was gracefully declined.

"I likes me dose by der streed, sometimes; dot vhas style und gomvort in a bunch; but py home—dot vhas me in bipe! I plows a gloud mit you, py-und-py, maype, but schust now—business, mein friendt!"

"All right, and business goes," assented McRustie, leaning back in his chair, deftly blowing little rings of blue smoke, his big eyes watching them rise, enlarge, and gradually break apart.

Nevertheless he seemed in no particular hurry to say more, and with equal patience German Gus leaned against the mantel-piece, awaiting the pleasure of his oddly acting acquaintance.

When that silence was broken, the words came bluntly enough:

"As a detective, sir, you can find lost articles, of course?"

"We are supposed to have that power, certainly."

"All right, so far! Now, then, I want you to find me a woman and a girl: will you do that?"

"Wait a bit, please," with a faint smile coming into his youthful face. "Are they enemies, or friends?"

"Both."

"You can give some clew to them, of course?"

There was a period of hesitation, during which McRustie moved a hand to his bosom, as though feeling for some object hidden there. His heavy brows gathered, and a hard expression chased away the half smile with which he had so far spoken.

The limber cane came down with almost vicious emphasis on his leg, but his attitude was not altered beyond that.

"Use your own judgment, sir," quietly added Lucksinger. "Still, if I am to undertake your case, I ought to have at least a hint or two."

"That isn't what bothers me, pardner," bluntly exclaimed McRustie. "Only—if I tell the whole story, I'll have to bear down mighty rough on the—on a woman. And that's what galls, don't you see?"

"Then it's the girl you consider an enemy, of course?"

"Don't you think it, man!" with sudden energy. "Enemy? And she my own flesh and blood?"

"I beg pardon, I'm sure, but—"

"That ought to come from me, by good rights," his manner once more altering abruptly. "I need your help, or the help of some other good man with experience in this line. And so I'll tell you all!"

Another brief hesitation, during which the puffs came so rapidly that cigar-smoke hid his face as with a vail, then the words:

"I've got to have help, and, of course, you can't give me that without at least a glimpse of the lay-out, pardner. So here goes!"

"This woman: she played me dirt, and I

more than half-believe she was at the bottom of our little racket to-night!"

"You think this woman set those thugs upon you, sir?"

"Just that! I've tried to drive away the belief, but it sticks to me tighter than a cockle-burr to a donkey's tail!"

"They meant murder, of course, you understand," gravely suggested German Gus. "That stab was surely intended for you, instead of the rascal."

"I know that," with a moody frown. "Still, I loved the woman, once, and I'd hate for it all to get wind: her story and mine, I mean, you understand?"

"I have plenty of work on hand, as it is, Mr. McRustie," remarked Lucksinger. "I am by no means sure I can afford to take your case, even if you really wish me to do so. Still, I'm willing to listen to your story if you care to tell it, and if I have to decline, be sure your trust shall never be betrayed by me."

CHAPTER III.

AN ILL-STARRIED MARRIAGE.

HIS chair came to a level with a thump, and Austin McRustie reached forth a muscular hand to grasp that of the German detective once more.

"Good enough!" he ejaculated, as their grip grew closer. "You're clean white, or all signs lie! I'll trust you first, then coax, buy, or bully you into taking my job—sure!"

"Not if it interferes too seriously with prior jobs, my dear sir," declared Gus, but taking a seat with the air of one prepared to listen with undivided attention.

"Not if I make it worth double wages, eh?"

"Not if you offer me a gold mine, sir."

"I can do just that, too," with a grim chuckle. "I'm not so mighty much for looks, I'll admit, but, when it comes to putting down solid rocks, I'm on deck once more! But, so I was in those days!"

His tones changed, his face grew longer and a trifle pale. Evidently disagreeable memories had come back, too strong even for his exuberant spirits to readily control.

"You are one of the fortunate mortals, sir. Money is good, in its place, but an entire gold mine—mein cracious! What a country! What a beobles!"

It was once more German Gus who flung up his hands with a gesture expressive of mingled awe and admiration.

Austin McRustie flushed hotly, and an ugly glint sprung into his eyes, just as though he strongly suspected he was being made a jest of.

"Fortunate, is it? That's your say-so, pardner, not mine. Once I had pretty much the same idea, but it didn't last long after the Madame came across my life-trail."

"Oxcoose me, mein friendt," hastily apologized the detective, with an earnest sincerity in both face and voice which could not be doubted. "I means me not to shoke mit you, when I say me dose words. I don't vhas make me glear meaning, sometimes, but when I say me dot, I means schust so: you vhas rich, dot vhas goot-luck, ain'dt it?"

"Never mind, pardner. I was a fool for sweating under the collar so soon, but when you hear my whole story, I reckon you'll understand just why I felt stung. Fortunate mortal! Well, others called me that, in the days of old, too!"

"That was when I had struck it mighty rich, you understand, and before I met up with the Madame. After— Well, you shall judge for yourself just how fortunate I was!"

"Never mind the details. Enough that I made a big strike in the gold-country, just when I was shoal on the bar: hadn't a second shirt to my back, and only rags and tatters of the first one, too!"

"They say luck breeds luck. So it seemed in my case. No sooner had I made one lucky strike, than others turned up. Everything seemed to come my way, and left me a winner, no matter whether I played it wide open, or put a copper on to lose."

"Inside of one year from my first hit, I was numbered among the richest men in mining affairs, and could sign my check for six figures without fear of its coming back to me dishonored.

"I held mining properties which, even at forced sales, would have brought in a princely fortune, and if sold at their true value, would bring enough to run a country in grand style for a dozen years!"

Evidently Mr. McRustie was growing a bit extravagant in his assertions, but German Gus made no sign. Possibly he believed it all, but far more likely he remembered the little ripple of a few moments earlier.

The Western representative paused for a brief space, like one regretfully viewing the past, then gave his big frame a vigorous shake before picking up the thread of his story once more.

"I was a widower, then, you understand, pardner. I had one child: my little girl, Myrtle. She was a daisy, if I do say it myself. Took after her mother for good looks, but was all my kid when it came to actions."

"I can see now where I made my first big mistake; but then— Well, she was all I had to

keep me from growing into a mere money-making machine, and I couldn't bear to cross the little lady, no matter how foolish her fancies might be."

"Spare der rod, und sboil der kinder!" murmured German Gus.

"That's no lie, neither," gravely assented McRustie, with a subdued sigh of regret over his past errors, but adding more briskly: "I had to tell you that much, pardner, but now I'll run 'em out in bigger hurry, or you'll want to jump the game before we sight the hock-card."

"A trip of mine to Denver set it all in motion, for 'twas while there that I first met up with the Madame. She was playing at Tabor's Opera House. Never mind the play: I didn't, nor anything else, for that matter, after the Madame came upon the stage for the first time!"

"It was a modern instance of the three v's, I reckon. She took the town, and I was one of the hardest hit. I was past thirty, then, but I couldn't have taken it more to heart if I'd been growing my first crop of fuzz!"

"For a week or two I was content to worship through my eyes alone, but that soon began to leave me hungrier than ever, and so—I had plenty of money, and when a fellow is willing to pay with a scoop-shovel, it isn't very hard for him to open a barred gate."

"I followed the Madame to her next stand, and there I managed to secure an introduction to her in due form. I was received politely, but coldly—ice-water was boiling in comparison to it, man!"

"That failed to scare you off, though?" mildly queried Lucksinger.

McRustie laughed faintly, but there was far more of bitterness than of mirth in the notes.

"Right you are, pardner, else I wouldn't be here now, singing this doleful song! Scare me off! Why, man, dear, if I'd won one bright smile from those red lips, sudden death and eternal destruction couldn't have made me jump the game before breaking the bank!"

"Which means that you wooed and won the bright particular star?" gently inquired Gustave, evidently in hopes of hurrying that recital along a bit more rapidly.

"Just that, pardner!" with a moody scowl as he nodded his head in assent. "I stuck to my knitting until I'd made my point: the Madame consented to leave the stage and trot with me in double harness over the rest of the route."

"You were supremely happy, of course?"

"I just was, although you mayn't mean it that way," came the swift answer. "When the Madame laid herself out to please—well, no man of flesh and blood could resist her, if I do say it myself! And in those earlier days she did her whitest—I'll give her so much credit, at least!"

"As for me, I felt that this world wasn't half good enough for her, or for her use, and I'd have cut the full moon up into lightning-bugs for her black hair, if the Madame'd only breathed a hint that way!"

McRustie spoke with almost fierce emphasis, flashing a look at his host from beneath those heavy brows, as though defying him to express either mirth or incredulity at his peril. Instead, German Gus merely nodded his comprehension, then gravely spoke:

"Yaw! I knows me how dot vhas myself, by Katrine! I veels like I must dake a rainpow und sdring dot all oafers stars, den tie a pow-knot under her neck, und bin it vast a gomet mit—eh?"

McRustie scowled blackly for a brief space while gazing into that visage opposite, but burst into a hearty laugh, the clouds rolling aside as he leaned forward for another hand-grip.

"Put 'er there, pardner! You've stuck a huckleberry on top of my persimmon, but—hope I may die if I wasn't in earnest, though! Anything milder couldn't even begin to tell how I worshiped the Madame, those days!"

"If such days might never change!" sighed Lucksinger, pensively.

"Who could stand the pressure, though? I know now that I couldn't, but then—auh! When I was forced to take notice of the change and that wasn't until long after all the rest of our little world knew the whole history—I felt like this world had been swapped off for another, and that old Satan had bossed the trading!"

"It wasn't that the Madame had any particular lover, mind you, pardner: she wasn't that sort, to give her what's due. But, she was just holy p'izen on flirting, and soon had a tail of would-be-lovers tagging at her heels, longer than any comet you ever saw!"

"Of course that didn't agree with my notions. I felt that what was mine, ought to be mine alone. And so I kicked like a bay steer!"

"For a few months, that seemed to do some good, though I know now that it was the other medicine; we kept flitting from place to place, and at each one I spent money freer than water running down hill."

"But, all the same, my eyes had been opened, and I began to learn more of the truth. For one thing, I mighty soon found out that the Madame had entirely weaned my daughter from me, binding her love to herself."

"Maybe I was to blame, in goodly part, for I'd almost forgotten the little lady lived, in my passion for the Madame. She was a proud,

spirited little piece, too, and so—well, it cut me to the quick when I fairly found it out, and I haven't got over it yet!"

"Then, to crowd it into small compass, the Madame resumed her flirting, hotter and stronger than ever. I stood it as long as flesh and blood could stand such a thing, then I turned myself loose!"

"I thumped one fellow into his bed, and put another under doctor's care with a bullet through his lungs; he was too terribly polite and tooney to fight except according to the code, ye know!"

"If I'd stopped at that much, maybe the Madame wouldn't have felt so bad over the racket, but, I didn't! I let out at her, and for once in her life, I reckon she knew what it meant to outrage an honest husband where he felt the tenderest!"

"And then?" gently insinuated Lucksinger, as McRustie paused.

"She made at me with a knife. She struck full at my throat, but I was quick enough to catch her wrist. We had a struggle for the blade, but I got it from her. And at the same time I tore another object from her left hand."

McRustie spoke hoarsely, now, giving short, fierce puffs at his cigar the while. His eyes were lowered, as though afraid or ashamed to meet those cool, clear orbs opposite.

"The Madame gave a wild scream, then rushed away, to her chamber. I left the house, going to a hotel, where I spent the night. I had plenty to think of, and she—well, I learned, later, that the Madame was even busier than I had been, that night!"

"You mean she left you, for good and all?"

"Precious little good about it, but you're right as to the leaving, pardner. I gave her time for thinking better of it; waited two whole days before going home—to what had once been home, rather!"

"You failed to find her there, then?"

"Just that! The Madame was gone, and had taken Myrtle with her. I couldn't make it seem true, somehow, but I soon had to come up to the rack; my wife had abandoned me, and try my level best I couldn't get trace of either woman or girl!"

The detective was growing more deeply interested, now, for as he covertly studied that strong face, he read far more than was permitted to show on the surface.

Outwardly Austin McRustie was cool, even indifferent, leaning back in his chair, gently tapping one leg of his trowsers with the cane as he slowly breathed rings of smoke through his rounded lips.

But the keen eyes of the detective could look deeper, and he knew that this strong man was still suffering, was still sick at heart.

"But, surely, sir, there was some clew left behind?" German Gus ventured, after a brief pause. "They could not have vanished so completely as all that comes to?"

McRustie gave a start, like one whose thoughts are broken by an unexpected sound, then he asked:

"Is a human thumb what you'd call a clew pardner?"

It was Lucksinger's turn for a start, and that he gave, despite his trained composure. A hot flush shot into his face, then passed away, to leave it paler than before.

"What you means by dot, mein herr?" he asked, almost fiercely.

For answer, Austin McRustie took a velvet case from his bosom, opened it, then extracting a human thumb, held it into full view as he asked in tones of studied calmness:

"How do you like the looks of that, pardner, for a clew?"

CHAPTER IV.

A CURIOUS WORK OF ART.

To all seeming it was a human thumb, freshly severed from the parent member!

Its color was lifelike, just tinged with a flush as of perfect health, otherwise of almost pearly whiteness and velvet texture.

Viewed from this standpoint, it was anything but a ghastly relic, yet Gustave Lucksinger turned pale as death, and his eyes were wide-scarred as he gazed at the strange clew so abruptly exhibited by Austin McRustie.

His breath came swift and hard. His fingers twitched as his hands involuntarily moved in that direction. They seemed longing to grasp that handless thumb, as though it had been a priceless treasure.

McRustie was smiling, after a somewhat grim fashion, but that smile quickly vanished as he took note of the detective's strange manner.

"Hallo!" he ejaculated, drawing back the thumb as though he expected a covetous snatch to follow. "What's biting you, pardner?"

An instant change came over the detective at these words, and with a grave smile, he spoke:

"Nothing much, Mr. McRustie. Only—may I examine your clew, sir?"

After a barely perceptible hesitation, his client extended the odd article, and Lucksinger held it closer to the gas-jet, carefully examining the cunning work of art; for such the thumb proved to be.

This fact was no additional surprise, for at his

first glance he had noticed the fastenings attached, by means of which the artificial member was secured to the mutilated hand which it served to complete.

Made of rubber, combined with other ingredients which he made no attempt to discover just then, there was a curious similitude in its touch to the living flesh it was plainly intended to represent.

Under that velvety surface delicate springs were cunningly hidden, and even with the imperfect test which he was able to give it, Lucksinger saw how admirably the imitation was calculated to fill the place of the original.

"From the left hand, too!" Gus muttered, drawing a long breath as he pursued his examination.

"That's what I said, partner," quoth McRustie, watching his host through half-closed lids. "The Madame was a mighty smart-built woman—the kind poets liken to Juno, you understand—and when she came at me with her knife, I had to do some right smart wrestling to keep a whole hide, big as I am. And so—Well, when I pulled her thumb off, imagine my feelings if you can!"

"Then you never suspected her having a maimed hand, sir?" asked the detective, flashing a keen glance that way.

"Never a suspect, sir! And I'd mumbled that same hand times beyond counting! I'd praised her perfect fingers—including that same infernal thumb, too! Otten? Ay! times untold! And never once did I suspect that even so much of her make-up was a fraud!"

This came in a tone of self-disgust, but Lucksinger paid no heed. He was still inspecting that curious work of art with unfailing interest, mentally comparing it with—what?

"Sounds odd, I know, but I'm dealing you straight goods, pardner," added the Western man, losing something of his forced cynicism, perhaps unconsciously betraying how far he was from actually hating the woman who had wronged him so deeply.

"Twas odd, too! Yet I know now that it was merely part of the game the Madame was dealing against me! She was false all through, else she could never have taken the course she did, after that bit of a blow-up!"

"Yet—I loved her! I fairly worshiped the very ground she left a footprint upon! And for years I lived with and loved her as a true wife, and never so much as suspected that she had a maimed hand, until it came away in my grasp that day!"

German Gus looked up at this, quietly saying:

"I do not wonder, if the joining was as perfect as this bit of work. She could use her thumb, then?"

"As perfectly as though it had been born with her, else I'd surely have found it out before. Why, man, dear, I loved every inch of her! And, so loving, wouldn't I be apt to take notice?"

"It seems so, certainly," as he returned the thumb. "She was very sensitive, this Madame, then? She could not bear the exposure of her deformity? 'Twas that which caused her flight, nein?"

"Don't you think it, pardner!" with a return of his cynical bitterness as he balanced the thumb across a forefinger, puffing a jet of smoke toward it at the same time. "When I came to look into matters, I found that the Madame had been making arrangements for a flitting more than one month ahead of our little spat. Still, no doubt, that hurried her up a bit."

"It was not—pardon, sir, but—"

"Wrong there, too," interrupted McRustie. "She didn't run off with a handsomer man, though that would have been easy enough: she might have taken her pick from a hundred, more or less. She only took Myrtle with her—and my wealth."

Lucksinger looked his surprise, but did not venture to ask the question in words. McRustie frowned, then spoke doggedly:

"I've said enough until after you've done a bit of talking, pardner. Of course I know I'll have to give the story entire, if I'm to have intelligent aid from a detective, but—Are you that man, sir?"

"I think I may promise you so much," came the grave response. "If not—if, on further investigation, I find that your case will conflict too strongly with other cases which I am in honor bound to press with as little delay as may be, I'll agree to introduce you to another detective, who can and will do all that lies in his power to help you."

"That's better than a flat refusal, yet I'd heap sight rather have you tackle the job, pardner," almost coaxingly spoke the mine-owner. "Say that you'll find me the woman whose hand matches that thumb, and you can name your own figures for payment. Will you do it, then?"

"Under the proviso already given, yes," bowed Gustave.

"Good enough, and there's my fist to seal the bargain!"

His hand was accepted; then, as McRustie settled back in his seat once more, Lucksinger added:

"You understand, of course, that this is pretty much like a confessional, Mr. McRustie? Nothing that you may say to me now, will go any further, unless it should end in a court-case. And, of course, I may have to touch on tender points, but—"

"That's all right, pardner. If I'm not case-hardened, I surely ought to be by this time. Fire ahead!"

"Well, as a starter, how much money did the Madame get away with?"

Despite the assurance just given, McRustie flushed hotly at this blunt query. It stung him to the quick, yet he rallied on the instant, replying:

"She made a fairly good haul, but why did you think so?"

"Partly because of your own words, but mainly because such women are always out for the dust."

The sport gave a start, and a frown of suspicion came into his face as he stared sharply at the detective before saying:

"You talk just as though you knew her, man!"

A grim smile flashed across the detective's face, and his strong jaws grew squarer for an instant. Then he made reply:

"That may be, too, sir, but I'll know better after I've heard more. Still, it's an easy guess, after what you've already admitted. Now, how long ago did this flitting take place?"

"Eight years, as nearly as may be."

"A long time, surely!" with a thoughtful frown as his keen eyes lowered. "And during those eight years you have not found her?"

"Never a find!"

"Of course, you have searched for her, since you're still so anxious to find the Madame?"

McRustie flung his exhausted cigar-stump into the grate, frowning darkly before answering:

"Of course, I've hunted, man! Just as soon as I could rake and scrape enough money together, that is, you know!"

"Then the Madame made a clean haul while she was about it? Pardon, my friend, but if I'm to undertake your case, I must post myself on all details," Lucksinger hastened to add, apologetically.

"That's all right, and I'm not kicking against it, pardner. Of course, it comes rather tough, just at first, to talk over such matters with a man who was a perfect stranger two hours ago, for—well, I *did* love that woman! Loved her harder'n a mule can kick down hill!"

Gustave did not even smile at this quaint simile, for he could see how intensely in earnest this stranger was. He was sympathetic enough to understand pretty well how he felt, and could make due allowance.

But his own interest in this case was far deeper than he cared to admit, and having certain points to win, he could not afford to let a false delicacy stand in his way.

"And your daughter: you loved her, also?" he asked, gently.

That was the right string to play upon, as he knew by that swift flush, those mistening eyes.

"Better now than ever! Better ten-thousand fold than while I was held under a spell by that—by the Madame, I mean!"

"Then you ought not to flinch from aught by means of which you may recover that daughter, my good friend. And so, once more: the Madame made a clean sweep before leaving?"

"Sue *did* just *that*! It was easy enough, taking a look back in cool blood, to see just how surely she had been paving the way for a flitting. 'Twas long before I'd believe the evidence of my own senses, but I had to come to the rack, in the end."

"How did she manage it? By forgery, perhaps?"

McRustie flushed hotly, his hands closing tightly. That question was far too pointed, and his manner showed as much when he spoke.

"Never you mind about that, stranger," he said, gruffly. "I know now that the Madame never loved me, even while she was honeying round the sweetest. But *I* loved *her*, all the same! She was my wife. I gave her my whole heart. My life seemed bound up in hers. I couldn't—Drop that point, stranger!"

Every word was confirming the suspicion expressed by the detective as to the forgery, but possibly McRustie was too strongly stirred up to notice his slip. Lucksinger was content to accept the fact, however, and gracefully yielded the point, outwardly.

"All right, sir, after I sum up the case as I see it," bowed the detective, gravely. "You married an actress who was called—Did you mention her name, Mr. McRustie?"

"Josephine Tudor, she was called on the play-bills," answered the other, after a brief hesitation. "Call her that, if my name isn't enough to fill the bill."

"A queenly title, for a queenly woman—exactly," with a graceful bow. "This wife, then, abandoned you, taking with her your daughter by a former spouse. This, after a serious quarrel during which the Madame tried to take your life with a knife. Instead, she lost a cunningly adjusted thumb, from her left hand;

and in her flight, the Madame managed to appropriate the larger part of your fortune, amounting to—how much did you say?"

"I didn't say, nor am I going to. That don't count, pardner."

This answer came with grave doggedness, and Lucksinger made no attempt to argue the point, for the time being at least.

"At all events, she took enough to cripple you seriously in your efforts to strike her trail, and that of your daughter. You preferred to suffer under this heavy loss, rather than call in the law-hounds to aid in your cause."

"You went to work, and made more money, knowing that without this aid you would be helpless just when money might bring you success. It was a wise move, and one which stamps you as a man beyond the common run."

"No guff, please, pardner," frowningly muttered McRustie.

"Your pardon, I beg," bowing once more with serious grace. "With money in hand, you took the cold trail. It led you here, to Chicago, and here you found your long-lost Madame? Is it not so, then?"

"How did you guess that, man alive?" ejaculated McRustie, amazed.

"Guess? Why, my friend, it is within my knowledge that Madame set those three thugs on you, this night; that she is determined to get back her lost thumb, I also know. She'll have that or your life—both, if possible!"

CHAPTER V. JOCKEY JEM AND HIS PAL.

ALTHOUGH the breath was pretty well knocked out of his body by one of his mates, who fell back from the heavy fist of German Gus, the leader of that deadly night-assault upon Austin McRustie managed to repeat his former cry—a bit of "thieves' argot," that advised speedy retreat.

The night-clubs of the police were rapping sharply; and therefore it would be worse than folly for the footpads to linger longer there.

Ducking and dodging, as though anticipating a bullet or two from the rear, the two "crooks" sped away down the dimly-lighted street until at the mouth of the first alley.

Into this they dodged like cats fleeing from a terrier, but only to leave it before the middle of the block was reached.

A narrow space left open between two buildings offered a chance to gain the street running parallel with that on which the affray had taken place, and nimbly scudding through the darkness, the well-posted little rascal leading the way, less than another minute found the two cut-throats in present safety.

"Nothing like knowing the lay of the ground," declared the smaller one of the two men, not only altering the tones of his voice, but robbing it of the strong "cockney" accent which had marked his speech earlier. "We're two quiet, hard-working coves, Dickey, who wouldn't kick up a blessed bobbery for all the world—world!"

"Don't run me into the light, then," surlily muttered his present mate, one hand nursing his smarting face as they walked leisurely along in a direction opposite to that in which they had headed when taking to flight. "Curse that fellow! He hit like a mule a-kicking!"

"Marked you, did he?"

"A black eye for to-morrow, dead sure!"

"Better that than worse, my covey," declared the little fellow, who appeared to be in high glee for one whose plans had been so completely foiled by an adverse fate. "Lay it to the cares of married life, if you have to explain to outsiders: splitting kindling-wood for the good of woman, and a stick flew up—see?"

Laughing again, he locked arms with his athletic companion, hurrying him along at a brisker pace, now that their backs were fairly turned upon the street where murder had been attempted, if not committed.

They were out of danger, now, so far as pursuit and arrest for that outrage was concerned, but Jem Cross, as the smaller crook was called, maintained that pace for fully a mile further, then urged his companion down the stone steps leading into an underground restaurant, or chop-house.

The dive happened to be without patronage as they entered, but Jem Cross made no pause at the bar, though an interchange of nods proved him by no means a stranger. A gesture was sufficient to convey his order, and leading his pal to one of the rude, box-like stalls ranged along both sides of the room, Cross dropped into one of the two chairs with which each little compartment was supplied.

Neither man spoke until after liquor and cigars had been brought by the burly attendant, who lingered a bit as though anticipating an invitation to join the couple for a "crack."

Failing to receive this, he slouched back to his station, scowling dyspeptically at everything in general.

"Here's to ye, me lad!" quoth Jem Cross, grasping the bottle and clinking its neck against one of the glasses.

"Look! your hand, Jockey Jem!" hoarsely whispered his pal, paling a bit as he made that discovery.

Cross dropped the bottle in his surprise, but

as he turned the hand more toward his own eyes, he gave a chuckle which surely did not express horror or regret.

"A bit o' red paint, is it, Dickey?" he said, with a grin which caused his full cheeks to wrinkle, and little rolls of fat to nearly eclipse his eyes for a moment.

"It's blood, man!"

"The bigger fool you for saying so above your breath, then!" came the swift retort, all in guarded tones, far too low for the ears back of the bar to catch understandingly.

Jockey Jem produced a red handkerchief from his pocket, doubling it over the mouth of the bottle. Giving this a few upward shakes to moisten the cloth, he quickly wiped away the worst of those tell-tale stains.

When this precaution was taken, Cross filled both glasses from the bottle, pushing one over to his pard, saying sharply:

"Put that down, Dick Ashton, and let it drown your fears. Why, cully, your face is more like dirty chalk than aught else I can think of!"

"You knifed him, then?" whispered the athletic fellow, in tones far from steady, his eyes still following that reddened hand. "I didn't know—I didn't think it would—"

"Drink, ye blooming bobby! If I cut him, wasn't it part of the job? Didn't you agree to—augh! drink, or you'll be turning molly-coddle in sober earnest, Dickey!"

Ashton obeyed, so far as draining his glass was concerned, but his pallor did not lessen, nor did his already discolored eyes lose that expression of horror so soon.

Jockey Jem Cross leaned back in his chair, curiously watching his pal, for this was a new phase in his character, so far as his experience went.

As a general thing, Dick Ashton was one to lead, rather than follow, and while he might not be utterly hardened in crime, this certainly was his first exhibition of womanish weakness.

Barring the traces of long dissipation and the imprints of Gustave Lucksinger's hard knuckles, that was far from being an uncomely face into which Jem Cross was gazing just then.

Dark hair, worn rather longer than customary. A neatly trained pair of mustaches and imperial. Clean-cut features, the only weak part being his mouth; that told of a man whom nature intended to be honest, but whom evil counsel led astray.

In almost every respect Jem Cross was Ashton's opposite.

Although his shoulders were broad, his chest full, betokening a far greater degree of muscular power than is usually found in one of his light weight, that was about all one could say in favor of the Englishman, without stretching the truth.

His close-cropped head and smoothly-shaven face were those of a typical "plug-ugly," or follower of the prize ring. His forehead receded abruptly, and was scarcely two finger-breadths in width. His nose was naturally a pug, and the bridge of it had been broken, flattening his face in the middle, and aiding his slightly projecting underjaw to increase his likeness to a bulldog.

Ashton set down his glass with a hand which trembled perceptibly. He tried to meet that mocking gaze without flinching, but was unable to do so.

Then he said, in low, husky tones:

"I've done my part, such as it was. I'm not well. I'll go bunk in, I reckon, Jockey."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and Cross also took to his feet, but only to say:

"No ye don't, Dickey! I'll step outside with ye, for that matter, but it's too early for bed, even if there wasn't—Steady, man!"

A sinewy hand gripped an arm of the larger crook, its almost fierce compression serving to recall Ashton to a sense of his imprudence. If murder had indeed been done, it would never do for him to call particular attention to himself just then.

Cross paid the score, taking care to keep his stained right hand hidden from the barkeeper; then the pals left the dive, both drawing a longer breath as they reached the crisp outer air.

"That's better—heap sight better!" declared Ashton, filling his capacious lungs. "Twas foul down yonder! Faugh! 'twas like a charnel-house, and I can taste it even yet!"

"What's come over ye, man, dear?" curiously demanded Cross, turning for a keen glance into that pale face. "Is it the red paint, then? If I set it to flowing, wasn't that in the bargain? And, be sure, neither of the lads will blow the gaff, even if the bobbies did nip them both!"

"Not that—it isn't just *that*, pardner," muttered Ashton, with another shiver as he cast a swift glance around them. "But—I've got the blues, worst sort! I've been thinking—thinking deeply, too!"

"About the silliest thing a cove of your caliber could do, too!" commented Cross, gravely.

"Thinking, eh? What about, Dickey?"

"Nothing that you could understand, even if I was to tell ye, lad. About the past, then, curse you!" with a sudden burst of fierceness.

"What's past is past, and only a fool would try to fetch it back," coarsely said the Englishman. "Why try it, Ashton?"

"I've tried to drive it away, rather, but, I couldn't—just couldn't, then! When I saw her—once within my grasp, I fancied! When I saw her, a rich, finely dressed wife and happy mother, then looked at myself—what am I, now?"

"A pal and brother, to be sure," promptly answered Cross, but with an ugly sneer underlying his words. "Come, man, brace up and be a man! It's too late for such silly thoughts, and there's still another bit of work on hand for this same night, d'ye mind?"

Dick Ashton caught Cross by the shoulder and throat, lifting him clear of the ground, giving him a vicious shake before muttering, hoarsely:

"You devil! Why shouldn't I crush the very life out of you, like I might mash a poisonous toad that spat at me—say?"

In that fierce grasp Jockey Jem seemed helpless as a child, but his cool nerve did not fail him, and he managed to utter:

"Because I 'old yer life hon the tip o' me tongue, Dickey, boy! Because, hif ye break with me, the ole world han yer fam'ly shall know just who it is that parses hunder the name hof Dick Hashton, then!"

Only by lapsing into his original cockney dialect did the little fellow betray the fierce anxiety which he surely must be feeling, and with that one exception he seemed as cool as ever. Certainly his was no ordinary nerve, but it carried the day.

Relaxing his grip, Ashton mumbled an apology, which Cross saw fit to accept at once.

"That's hall right, me covey!" he assented, once more locking arms and moving off at a brisk pace. "Hi'm not going to be 'ard up on ha good pal just for one slip, like; honly—don't try for to come hit hover me hagain, Dickey, lad!"

Smoothly though those words came, Dick Ashton gave a little shiver at that final warning. He knew Jem Cross was vicious and venomous to an excess, and that passionate grip might even yet bring him sore trouble.

Still, he made no reply, and yielded to the guidance of the man he both hated and feared, just as he had so frequently yielded before.

Neither man spoke for some little time, and then Jem Cross let fall nothing to cause alarm. Neither did he explain what he had meant when making allusion to yet another stroke of work which had to be done that night.

Hardly a score of words in all passed between the men during the remainder of that brisk walk. Jem Cross at last led the way into a large, dingy-looking tenement-house situated on a back street, mounting the stairs to the second story, like one thoroughly familiar with his surroundings despite the darkness, hardly lessened by the smoky oil-lamp bracketed against the wall at each landing.

He stepped with hardly a sound, yet it seemed nothing more than his customary caution, for he showed no hesitation, even when passing by an open door through which a dim light was streaming.

Advancing pretty well toward the rear of the building, Cross produced a key, with which he unlocked a closed door, swinging it wide as he bade Ashton enter.

He followed after, pushing the door to, but without latching it behind them, then speaking:

"You're not afraid of the dark, Dickey, boy? Wait here a bit, then. I'll not be gone long, mate."

"Where are you going, and what for, Jem?"

"Just to see if all's ready for the little bit of job I hinted at, me covey," chucklingly answered Cross, then moving away, catlike.

CHAPTER VI.

NETTING A DAINTY BIRD.

AYING little attention to either words or action, Dick Ashton felt around in the dark until he struck against a chair, into which he sunk, bowing head and chest, and giving himself up to moody reflection.

This was not an entirely strange mood for him. More than once, and far oftener of recent days, just such fits had taken full possession of the man; but Jockey Jem had never known one to reach such a depth of dejection, or, more properly, remorse.

And Ashton had spoken nothing more than the simple truth when he asserted it all came from a glimpse he had had of the past: of what might have been *his* share and lot, only for his own weak will!

He could see *her* now: proud, beautiful still despite the increase of years. He could see her, just as he had glimpsed her then, rolling by in her fine carriage, dressed in silks and jewelry, with an even more lovely young face at her shoulder!

And he—what was he, now?

Brooding thus, Jockey Jem Cross found his pal, on his return from a brief tour of inspection, and a scowl of half-anger, half-scorn came into his bulldog visage as the glimmer of a lighted match showed him that pale, haggard countenance.

Still, Cross said nothing until after a lamp was lighted where it stood upon a bare table. Then, leaving the chamber door just ajar, he drew a chair closer to his mate, resting heels on a round, elbows on his knees, and spoke in low, guarded tones:

"It's all right, and we've a bit longer to wait for our game, Dickey boy! But—she'll come, safe enough! Never fear for that, my covey!"

"She? Then it's a woman, this time, pardner?" slowly asked Ashton.

"A slip of a girl, yes," nodded Cross, for an answer.

"What sort of a job do you mean to make of it, Jem?"

"Just too easy for hanythink!" with a touch of London entering his tones as they grew enthusiastic. "Good pay, with less risk hof 'ard knocks than the hother job, ye know, me lad!"

Ashton was rousing himself from the moody reverie into which he had fallen, and now flashed a keen glance around them.

It was a dingy, cheerless room, scantily furnished, but one which he for the first time appeared to recognize.

His lips came tightly together as he glanced toward the door, and seemed to read what lay beyond.

Cross had not been long enough away to leave the house, so the girl he spoke of must live beneath the same roof. And then the truth seemed to flash upon his bemused brain, all at once.

"It isn't—not the little milliner, Jem?"

"Hif I say yes, me covey?"

"Do you say it, man?"

"I do say it, then! What comes next?" with sudden sharpness in tone and in glance.

Ashton lowered his eyes, shrugging his broad shoulders like one who feels a cold blast. Then he muttered, half-sullenly:

"Nothing, of course, if you say it's got to be so. Only I'd far rather kill two men than do aught to fetch harm upon *her* shoulders!"

Jockey Jem wrinkled his features with a silent laugh as he sat gazing into that pale, moody face. He surely might have chosen a more willing helper, but the spice of devil in his bulldog composition made him enjoy the vain struggles of this misguided man.

Still, he was not lacking in a certain degree of prudence, and knew from past experience that Ashton could prove himself an awkward customer if driven past the point of endurance. And so, in smooth, almost affable tones, he spoke again:

"If it is all for her own good, my lad? Wouldn't that make a difference with ye?"

"Just what sort of a job have you been setting up, Cross?"

"It isn't every one of the lads I'd take so much extra trouble with, me covey, but *you*—that's another thing! You've been a *gent*, even if you have come down a bit, of late. So, listen, then!"

"You've seen the little girl, I take it?"

"If you mean the little milliner, yes."

"I do mean her: Maggie Lester, she's called."

"I know. Go on, please."

"So I will, lad, since we have to wait for her home-coming. I knew she would spend the evening out, and so I took a look—ye saw me, lad: 'twas to her door I went, a bit ago.

"There was no light, and it's a long play at the Garden, to-night. She'll not be in much before midnight, if not a bit later than that."

"She's gone to the play, then?"

"Yes. With the red-haired girl, over the hall, yonder. I made sure of that, before picking on this night for doing up the job."

"What is it, man? Not—not like *that*?" with a little nod toward the hand which still bore a dim, reddish tinge of human blood. "Why don't ye wash it off, man?"

"Time enough, later on," came the cool response. "Like that job, you arsk, Dickey? No, not a bit of it, although I count on making still bigger money out of this trick, if turned successfully."

"How much? It ought to be big money, poor child!"

Ashton sighed, involuntarily, then flushed hotly as he caught that sneering, cynical gaze fixed upon his face.

"Is it a case of spoons, lad? Better not, though! There's eyes of your betters fixed on the little lady, and—Hark!"

Jem Cross suddenly started to his feet, tiptoeing to the door, where he bent an ear in listening for a few moments.

From the lower floor came the sound of a silvery, merry laugh, that told him his game was drawing near the net he had spread for it.

Silently passing back nearer his ally, Jockey Jem spoke in a swift whisper:

"They've come home, and will soon be up to their rooms. Mind ye, Ashton, it's got to be done, and done without a hitch or a balk! If you fail me now, I'll—"

"Spare your threats, pardner," coldly interrupted the big fellow. "You've got me foul, and I can't help myself."

"You'll play your part, then?"

"When I know just what that part is, yes. How can I get out of it, even if I wished?"

"You can't, without gettng into a still snugger box, me lad!" the smaller rascal asserted.

ed, with a vicious chuckle, once more bending ear toward the door.

"Talk mighty sudden, then, for they're coming up the stairs."

"Oh, there's time enough, and to spare," with admirable coolness. "Red-head's room comes first, and, like all girls, they'll have to take a bit of a crack together, first."

While saying this, he passed over to where the narrow bed stood, slipping a hand under the thin mattress, drawing forth a flat parcel, from which he tore the paper, then held up a pitch plaster near the light for Ashton's inspection.

"You'll manage this, me lad," he whispered, still with an attentive ear for the sounds without that chamber. "We can't wait for Maggie to fall asleep, for she locks her door o' nights. I made sure of that, long ago."

"You mean to kidnap her, then?"

"Of course! And we've got to manage the job without so much as a single howl, or we'll have the whole Hive buzzing about our ears."

Ashton had no difficulty in understanding that allusion. The huge tenement-house, like many another, had a title—the "Hive," and so far as mere numbers of occupants went, the designation was most appropriate.

He took the pitch plaster, touching it with a finger-tip, then holding it near the lamp-chimney for a few seconds.

Jockey Jem nodded his approval.

"That's the style, me covey! No need to explain further, eh?"

"I know what it's for, but they're here!"

"And stopping at Red-head's door, just as I predicted," whispered Cross, moving noiselessly toward the door, after blowing out their own light. "They'll not stop long together, I imagine, for to-morrow's another work-day, and Maggie is a—'Sh-sh!'"

Gently pushing the door further ajar, the two crooks peered forth, catching a glimpse of the two young women as a light was struck in a chamber nearer the front of the building, on that same floor.

Only a glimpse, but that was sufficient. Both men recognized the game they were to entrap, and silently awaited the right moment.

This was not much longer delayed. The next day was a work-day, as Jockey Jem had said, and the hour was late. Maggie Lester could not afford to lose more sleep, dearly though she would have liked to chat with her friend over the play they had witnessed, in company; a most unusual dissipation for such poor working-girls it was, too!

A few words in parting; a gay good-night and sincere wish for pleasant dreams; then Maggie Lester, softly humming a catch from one of the songs she had heard that night for the first time, tripped along to her own door through the dimly-lighted corridor.

The two men watched her movements from their ambuscade, but made no move until their keen sense of hearing told them Maggie was unlocking her chamber door.

"Come, lad," whispered Jockey Jem, stepping from the room. "No move unless she tries to lock her door. If she does *that*—the plaster, man! And remember that it must be silence, clear through!"

Not a sound betrayed their progress, but they were close to that chamber door when Maggie Lester opened it and passed through. Dim though the light was, Jockey Jem saw that the unsuspecting girl had not taken the precaution to even draw the barrier to, after passing through, and an arresting hand touched Ashton's arm.

"Wait, laid!" came the barely audible whisper. "She'll strike a glim to undress by, and then—see?"

There was a slight bustle inside the chamber, and as the crooks drew still nearer, they saw Maggie Lester striking a match, with which she lit a half-burned candle resting upon a small table which stood near the bed, across the foot-rail of which she had tossed her light wraps.

As the light blazed up, a fairer view could be obtained of the maid; and a charming picture she made, just then.

Small, of almost child-like dimensions, yet with a trimly rounded figure, Maggie was more than good-looking; she fell little short of being a beauty, with her curling locks of jet, her great brown eyes, and child-like purity of complexion.

Ashton drew a breath longer than usual, but Jockey Jem had only an eye to business. He gripped an arm, then whispered, softly:

"Now's the time, lad! You grasp her, and clasp the plaster over her mouth. Grip tight, and don't let her kick up a row, whatever you do!"

Ashton nodded his full comprehension, then stepped on tiptoe into the chamber, one hand holding the plaster, the other reaching out to clasp their prize. Then—a swift leap!

With sure coolness the deed was done!

Ashton lifted the surprised maiden clear of her feet, pressing the pitch plaster over her lips before a cry could issue therefrom. And with equal celerity, Jockey Jem caught up the shawl recently discarded by the working girl, flinging it over her head to blind her eyes.

"Good henough!" he said, huskily, with a grim chuckle as his hands caught those kicking ankles to help in her subjection. "Heasy, hold man! She's worth ha mint hof gold, hand we don't want to spoil 'er value nyther, ye know!"

In such hands, victory was but a matter of moments, and almost ere Maggie Lester could divine her peril, she was bound and helpless, her lips closed by that adhesive plaster, her poor strength wasted in vain struggles to break away.

But then, just as Jockey Jem was in highest glee over their easy success, the voice of Rose Hollinger, Maggie's girl friend, came echoing along the corridor, calling to her who vainly struggled to answer.

Instantly Cross sprung to swing the door to, but, as he did this, he saw how imminent was the risk of discovery.

"Curse the girl!" he snarlingly whispered to Ashton. "She's coming hover this way to see our gal! Hif she spoils hus—we'll 'ave the 'ole bloom'in' 'ive buzzing round hour hears!"

"Maggie, I say!" cried Rose, coming rapidly toward that chamber.

CHAPTER VII.

FLITTING TO FRESH COVER.

DISCOVERY seemed inevitable, and none knew better than Jockey Jem what would result from even one sharp scream for help.

Both of the girls were well-thought of in the Hive, and enough honest hearts and willing hands would come to the rescue to make the result certain.

Still, neither of the crooks lost his nerve now that it was most needed, and Jockey Jem swiftly whispered to his pal:

"Old her still, lad! Vait for me vord, and then—"

He left his meaning to be inferred, for there was danger even in a whisper, now Rose Hollinger had approached so close.

"Maggie, girl!" the red-haired maiden was calling, with a touch of rising impatience in her tones as she reached that chamber door. "Why don't you answer, child? I've got to see—Oh!"

Rose pushed the door inward, stepping over the threshold as she spoke, then pausing with a gasp, rather than a cry, of amazed alarm, as she caught an indistinct glimpse of Dick Ashton as the tall sport stood at bay with a muffled figure silently struggling in his arms.

Only that one fleeting glimpse was vouchsafed her, for Jockey Jem was swift to act when occasion called, and springing out from the shadow cast by the opening door, he assailed Rose Hollinger from behind, flinging one arm around her neck, while a knee was pressed against the small of her back.

The bone of his sinewy forearm closed her windpipe, rendering an alarm impossible, and before the surprised girl could summon her powers to even struggle against that scientifically applied garrote, Cross doubled his fist and struck her a cruel blow full upon one temple.

Never a sound escaped the poor girl, and only a faint tremor ran through her figure as its nerves relaxed. The one blow was sufficient, and knowing as much, Jockey Jem relaxed his grip, permitting Rose to slide through his arms to the floor, where she lay like a corpse.

"Don't kill her, pard!" huskily muttered Ashton, who had watched all this with breathless interest, but whose remnant of manhood revolted from such brutality.

"Cheese it, cully!" whispered back the cockney, as he swung the door nearly to, then crouched by the crack in listening.

There were no signs of an alarm having been taken, and after a brief space spent thus, Jockey Jem rose erect, with a broad grin wrinkling his bulldog visage.

"Good luck's stic'ing tight to us, matey," he whispered, moving a bit nearer Ashton, giving a little nod of approval as he passed by the prostrate figure of poor Rose Hollinger. "Never ha whimper hout hof hyther wench, and both just has we want 'em!"

"She's not— You didn't 'croak' her, Jockey?"

A hard hand flew out to smother that name upon his lips, and Cross gave a vicious oath as his flaming eyes shot forth the warning his lips were too shrewd to utter so near the ears of their captive.

"Heverythink's lovely, don't Hi tell ye, matey? Now it's walker! Fetch the dainty one, hand don't fall hall hover yer feet, lad!"

While whispering these words, Cross was securing the rest of the articles which Maggie Lester had discarded on reaching her home. With these on one arm, he moved back to the door, blowing out the candle as he passed by the little table, then took another precautionary glance along that indistinctly lighted passage.

No one was visible, and with the exception of themselves, everybody seemingly had retired for the night.

A beck and a nod were sufficient to fetch the taller crook after him, and without an apparent care or thought for poor Rose Hollinger who lay as she had fallen, Jockey Jem led the way toward the rear of the house.

Although he had not held lodgings there for any great length of time, Cross had made himself perfectly familiar with the place, and could make his way without the need of a light, natural or artificial.

He descended to the ground floor by a rear stairway, then, by opening a couple of doors, found himself outside, beneath the twinkling stars, with Dick Ashton close to his heels, breathing a bit more rapidly than usual, perhaps, but otherwise betraying no signs of being overweighted.

Nothing had happened to check or delay their progress, and Jockey Jem had good grounds for his chuckle as he cast a glance at the human hive they had just left.

"Good has hold wheat, me covey! 'Oo says hit takes ha fool for luck, when wise men like hus can—"

"Which way?" interrupted Ashton, who felt much less at ease, judging from both tones and expression. "Want to stand here chawing wind until the whole hive swarms?"

"You're right, me covey, hand 'ere she goes!"

Jockey Jem stepped briskly across the narrow space which served that huge pile as a back yard, and opening a gate in the high board fence, stepped into the dark alley, craning his neck as he peered up and down that far from savory stretch.

"Hall right, hand 'ere we bare, matey!" congratulated the crook, a guiding hand touching the arm of his pal. "Be'old hour coach-hand-four, Dickey, boy! We'll finish hup hin 'igh style, heven hif we did start hout more like beggars!"

An answering whistle came back from the hack, and by the time the two crooks reached that spot, the driver was on the ground and had the door open for their admission.

"Hinside you tumble, me lad," said Cross, giving Ashton a little shove. "No singing haloud, ye mind, though! Disturbing the peace his too hawfully vulgar a charge for 'ight-tined gents like hus to plead to hafore the beak, don't ye know, me boy!"

Ashton raised no objections, but entered the coach as best he could with his burden, now more subdued, though plainly still in possession of her senses.

Jockey Jem closed and secured the door, then mounted with the driver to the box, after which the span of horses were sent rapidly ahead through the alley.

Once fairly inside the hack, Ashton relaxed his grip upon the captive girl, quite as much for his own relief as on her account, perhaps.

Yet, too, he had been but a half-hearted persecutor, and now that Maggie Lester made a more vigorous attempt to break the thongs with which her wrists were secured, in order to tear away that clinging plaster from over her lips, he restrained her with gentle force.

"Don't, child," he said, just loud enough for his words to be caught by her ears above the rumble of the wheels. "You can't get loose, and trying will only do you fresh harm."

Maggie Lester shivered at this vague threat, as he could feel. The meaning was readily interpreted, and Ashton hurriedly added:

"I didn't mean it just *that* way, my dear; don't think it. It's a nasty job, take it in the best light, but if they try to turn it to still worse, I'll kick—and kick mighty hard, too!"

Maggie ceased her efforts to break her bonds—most likely through conviction that such a feat was an impossibility, and only giving her physical torture as a reward. But Dick Ashton seemed to look at it in a more personal light, and his voice was even more kindly when he added:

"That's right, girly! I'm dealing you straight goods, and you can bank on what I say. 'Tis a dirty trick, so far, but I'll make it a mighty red one if they try to turn up worse cards for you!"

"I'm a low-down bound, or I wouldn't be in any such mix as this, my child, but, I'm not rotten clear to the core! I'm doing devil's work because there's a halter round my neck, with a mighty willing hand gripping the loose end."

"He'd yank me up a tree, and grin while watching me kick, I reckon; but if he thinks I'm going to always play dog to his master, that's right where he'll get fooled—and fooled mighty bad, too!"

This was hardly the sort of assurance Dick Ashton intended giving his charge, just then, but a sense of his own wrongs overpowered him for the moment, and he only checked himself when his own voice startled his ears.

The hack had left the rough-paved alley for the smoother blocks of a street, and the clattering subsided so suddenly that a thrill of dread shot through the big fellow:—had Jockey Jem caught his rash words, out yonder?

"Trust me, child," he whispered nevertheless, with lips close to those muffled ears. "I'll see you have a square deal, or I'll break up the game in a holy cirrus—that's me you bet!"

Of course the maiden was unable to respond,

and Ashton drew a bit apart from his muffled charge, although he breathed more freely as the vehicle kept rolling on without halting.

Surely, if Jockey Jem had caught aught of the mutinous speech back yonder he would not delay his answer!

For fully half an hour longer the hack rumbled along, maintaining a fairly swift pace, yet keeping within the line of safety. It would hardly pay to call special notice their way while they bore such a compromising burden, much less invite an arrest for illegal driving.

Then the hack drew up to the curb in front of a gloomy-looking house in a retired portion of the city, and, springing to the pavement, Jockey Jem ran briskly up a low flight of steps, rapping against the dingy panels with his knuckles in place of using the bell-pull.

Almost instantly the portal was opened; then Cross came back to the coach, opening the door and bidding Ashton to get out.

"Heverythink his lovely, hand the goose 'angs 'igh!" the rascal chuckled, waving a hand toward the driver as token that his services were no longer required, then following Ashton as the tall sport bore their prize up to the open door.

This was quickly closed behind them by a tall, masculine-looking woman of something more than middle age, whom Jockey Jem at once addressed:

"'Ere's the dainty bit hof dimity, Mother Winkle, hand she'll be hin your charge for the present. Turn 'er hover, matey! We'll flock by hour lonesome selves for ha bit, hif you don't hobject."

Dick resigned his charge without a word, either way, then followed the lead of Jockey Jem, up a flight of stairs to the second floor.

The little crook seemed fully as much at home here as he had shown himself at the Hive, entering a chamber where he found and lit a gas-jet without any trouble.

Ashton looked curiously around the place, for this was his first visit to that house; but his gaze brought slight reward.

The chamber was small, and by no means lavishly furnished. A bed, table, wash-stand, two chairs, and a small hair-covered trunk beside which Jockey Jem was already kneeling.

Throwing back the lid, Cross took forth a fresh suit of outer garments, which he proceeded to don in place of those which bore traces of the fight Austin McRustie had given the crooks at an earlier hour.

While washing hands and feet, and dressing, Jockey Jem kept up a rattling fire of words, through which Dick Ashton caught a dim idea of the game in which he had taken a far from willing part.

Among other things, Cross said:

"It's a big game, me boy! Big game, and bigger money, see?"

"Who's to do the paying, Jockey?"

"Never you mind *that*, Dickey, lad!" with a subdued chuckle, half-smothered as he twisted himself into a tightly-fitting coat. "The pay is sure, and that's the main point of interest."

"Of course, only—well, I only asked for want of something to say, so you needn't ruffle it so terribly grand, pardner."

"So you'd ruffle, if you knew as much as I do, Dick," declared Cross, now without even a trace of his cockney accent, as he brushed his hair in front of the little mirror hanging above the stand. "Big money, I tell you, man! Big money, even if I just take the first offer of cash down, but ten-fold pay if I like the looks of the future best!"

Ashton was puzzled, and his looks showed as much, but Jockey Jem had no immediate intention of satisfying that curiosity, although he took malicious delight in awakening the sentiment.

"Well, it don't mean actual harm to the girl, I hope, Jockey? If so you can count me out of the game, from this on!" declared Ashton.

Cross gave a low, amused laugh as he turned to face his pal.

CHAPTER VIII.

JOCKEY JEM AND HIS EMPLOYER.

"HARM to the girl, is it?" Cross echoed, his little eyes almost losing themselves under the tiny rolls of fat which wrinkled up before that laugh.

"That's what I said, pardner," doggedly muttered Ashton.

"So far from that, Dickey, boy, she'll thank us for doing her the greatest possible service."

"That's easy said, pardner, but just what do you mean, anyhow?"

"First, I mean to make a call which has been delayed too long, already," came the cool rejoinder. "You'll stay here, Ashton. If you grow sleepy before I get back, there's a bed; bunk in as soon as you like."

"And the girl?"

"Never you bother your brain about the girl, Richard. Mother Winkle has her orders, and will carry them out to the letter. And, mind you, me boy, don't let that soft heart of yours get you into fresh trouble."

Jockey Jem gave a nod and a grim smile which pointed his meaning too plainly for mistaking, but Dick Ashton showed no signs of resentment.

"You've passed word that no bodily harm shall come to her, pardner, and I'm relying on your say-so. That's enough. So-long, if you're really going, then!"

"I am going, yes. Maybe I'll have more to tell you when I get back, me lad. Until then—over-the-river!" and putting on his billycock hat, Jem swaggered out of the room, running lightly down the stairs and letting himself out through the front door.

He tripped briskly along until a corner was turned; then sighting an empty cab, he instantly hailed it. Entering, he gave a direction to the cabman, then settled down in the cushions, grunting lazily as he muttered:

"Why not, when another pocket stands the strain? A cove's a fool to walk when he can ride, just as well as not!"

The drive was not a very long one, and when Jem emerged from the cab, he paid his fare, stepping lazily toward the front door of the nearest house. But when the cab rattled away, he descended those steps with another chuckle, moving along the pavement as he muttered:

"Wasting trouble, maybe, but what's the hoods? If the boss wants secrecy, why not give it him, in great chunks? Anyway, cabby'll never be any the wiser as to his fare, this trip!"

Jockey Jem had not much further to go, for he came to a halt in front of a large mansion which stood a few yards back from the pave.

The house was dark, save for one window on the round floor. The blinds to this were swung back, but a lowered shade within shut off all view to chance passers-by.

Nimbly vaulting over the iron fence, Jockey Jem drew a few shots from a pocket, tossing them like a tiny shower of rain against this particular window. Twice this action was repeated; then the light was turned very low, and the window was lifted from within.

"Who is it?" asked a cautiously-pitched voice.

"The one you're waiting for, sir," whispered Cross in return. "It's all right, boss! Nobody astir but us, and shall I come in this way?"

"Yes. Lightly, mind!" answered that dimly outlined figure, stepping aside to leave the opening clear.

With the ease of a cat, Jockey Jem sprung through the opening, and his employer quickly closed both shutters and sash behind him. He drew down the shade, then crossed over to a gas-jet which showed a tiny point of blue flame, turning it up to a bright blaze.

This revealed the man, who was probably forty or forty-five years of age, judging from his smooth-shorn face.

In height he was little over the average, and by no means massively built. Yet, as he moved, one could see that he was gifted with both strength and activity beyond the common run of mankind.

Ordinarily, perhaps, he would have been termed fairly good-looking, but just now his face was unusually pale, and the lines of his countenance were strongly drawn. His black eyes betokened an uneasy brain as they turned toward the English crook, who now stood before the grate where a small fire was burning.

"You have succeeded, then, my man?" he asked, in harsh, but subdued tones. "I can see it in your eyes, man!"

"Then you're a keener, Mr. Reeves," declared Cross, with another of his peculiar grins, showing his tobacco-stained teeth in bulldog fashion. "Well, I'll not charge my peepers with lying, be sure!"

"Then you have found her?" repeated Eustace Reeves, his bony hands nervously clinching as he took a step nearer the fellow.

"She is in safe keeping, yes, sir."

"You have her, then? There is no room for mistake? She is surely the one I named to you?"

"Yes, to each and all of your questions, Mr. Reeves," came the reply, in marked contrast to the fierce, if subdued, excitement betrayed by the gentleman.

At this cool assurance, Eustace Reeves gave a long breath of intense relief, and his face cleared up as by magic.

"Thank Heaven for so much!" he ejaculated, moving across to where stood a large burglar-proof safe in a corner of the room opposite to the one which held a wide book-case and secretary combined.

Jem gave a grin at this, his face wrinkling up as though he meant to infer that, in his humble opinion, the regions of celestial delight had precious little to do with that particular part of the business in hand.

Still, he did not see fit to give plainer expression to his skepticism, but covertly watched each movement of his employer, his little eyes giving a covetous sparkle as he caught sight of the safe's interior.

Reeves opened an inner-door, pulling out a shallow drawer, from which he took a number of bank-notes, turning toward Jockey Jem as his long, thin fingers deftly counted out a certain amount of money.

"There's your reward, my good fellow," he said, holding forth the bills. "If I demand

good service, so I'm a prompt paymaster. I think you will find I've made no error, but, count it, man!"

"Just because I love to finger the darling flimseys, sir," chuckled Jem, who had already begun that delightful task before his employer gave permission.

Twice over he counted the notes, then rolled them up and thrust them deep down in a trowsers pocket, giving a nod of grim satisfaction as he did so.

"You are content with your wages?"

"Suited clear out of sight, sir!"

"Very well. Now, where is the girl?"

"In safe keeping, I think I told you, Mr. Reeves," came the cool response.

"But, where is she? At your house, where I met you last?" impatiently demanded his employer.

"Not there, sir. Finding would be too easy, don't ye know?"

"Finding?" echoed Reeves. "Why, who would take the trouble to look for her—a mere working-girl?"

"Well, I know one gent who thinks enough of that same working-girl to fork over a pretty penny, just for her finding, don't I?"

"Meaning me?"

"For certain, sir."

Reeves took a step nearer, his bony forefinger giving a menacing shake as he harshly spoke again:

"Look ye, my fine fellow! I've paid you your price for a certain bit of work, but if you think to bleed me further, why—What is it you do mean, then?"

"I mean business, Mr. Reeves," coolly answered the rascal, once more showing his yellow teeth. "I told you I knew how to find the girl you took such a powerful interest in, and I've proved my word. I have found her, haven't I?"

"So you say, but—"

"Wait, please. I also told you I'd hold her in snug hiding, didn't I, Mr. Reeves?"

"Until I was ready to assume charge of her, that meant, of course."

"With you, perhaps, but it didn't mean that with me," bluntly declared the crook, who plainly enjoyed his pleasant rôle, dangerous though it might have seemed to one less full of self-confidence.

Eustace Reeves turned very pale, and those lines grew plainer upon his sallow visage. His black eyes caught a reddish glow, as though the coal-fire was reflecting itself therein.

"Once more, what do you mean, fellow?" he demanded, holding his hot passions in check for the time being.

"Well, sir, you see I've been thinking this matter over pretty carefully, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm doing entirely too big a stroke of work for entirely too small pay."

Deliberately spoke Jem Cross, but back of those smooth, easy words lay a menace, which Eustace Reeves was quick to recognize.

"This is blackmail, you scoundrel! Do you think to frighten me into doubling your pay, man?"

"Would that choke your wind, boss?"

"It may make me choke yours, sir, unless—Bah!" with an impatient gesture. "I'm nearly as great an idiot as yourself, to let my angry passions rise, over such a silly attempt to extort more money."

But confidently though those words were uttered, and strongly though the man strove to make his face look reassured, Jem was shrewd enough to see that it was little more than a pretense.

He was by no means sure that Eustace Reeves was really frightened, in a physical point of view, but that his brain was more than uneasy, he felt fully certain.

"Easy, me covey!" Jockey Jem drawled, lifting a warning hand and stepping back a pace. "Why should two gents like us come to harsh words—not to mention blows—over such a trifl? Surely, as the Good Book says, the servant is worthy his hire?"

"That I've already given you, fellow," retorted Reeves. "You named your price for performing a certain piece of work, and I've paid you just that. Can you deny as much, sir?"

"Easy, please," repeated Jockey Jem, with another placating gesture, but which matched poorly with his malicious grin. "Let's take a cool, calm view of the matter, I beseech thee, brother!"

Reeves smothered a fierce imprecation. He knew now that he had no easy task, but that fact helped to steady his nerves.

"What have you to say, fellow? Cut it short, for time is passing, and I've made up my mind to assume sole charge of the girl before day dawns once more."

Jem Cross grinned afresh at this speech, but let it pass for the moment. Tapping forefinger against palm like one checking off items, he made a summary of events.

"A certain gent hires another gentleman to kidnap a certain girl. Said gent swears said girl is doing her best to trap another gent into a marriage, which will surely be ruinous to his prospects in life."

"First gent tells second gent third gent is a client of his, who is heir to a vast fortune and a

grand name. Girl too mean of birth to fit in such a gilded nest. Ana so girl must be removed!"

"Have I missed any important point, Mr. Reeves?"

"No; for I told you the naked truth about the matter, believing I could place implicit confidence in your fidelity—the more fool me for trusting a fellow with such a hang-dog face!"

Jem bowed at this, grinning like one who feels he has received a rare compliment, rather than an insult.

"And this girl is really angling for a rich young blood, sir?"

"She certainly is, just as I told you before!"

"Well, if I was to say just that, it'd be a blooming lie," coolly asserted Cross. "Since you say it, it's merely a mistake."

Once more Reeves flushed hotly, his hands clinching tightly as he confronted his rebellious employee.

"You infernal rascal! what are you trying to get at?" he demanded, harshly.

"The truth, for one thing, Mr. Reeves. And, to begin with, you lied about your client. Instead of a wild young blood, that client is a woman, and her name is Mrs. Gwendolyn Devreux!"

Eustace Reeves gave an involuntary start at this assertion, but quickly covered it with a low, contemptuous laugh, before saying:

"You're a bigger ass than I thought you, and that's needless!"

CHAPTER IX.

FLYING AT BIG GAME.

It was a very fair effort, all things taken into consideration, but Jem Cross was looking a little below the surface, just then, and was not so easily imposed upon.

He knew that his manner had made its impression, and though he felt there might be a tough battle of words and wits ahead, he felt no fear for the outcome.

"Ye may flinch or gibe, sir, but ye'll find I'm safe seated in the saddle, and that I'm riding to win," he quickly retorted. "The bigger the stakes, the richer the winning, ye know!"

"I repeat it, then: you're a greater ass than you look, and that is needless," declared Eustace Reeves, his thin lips curling with strong contempt.

This very repetition was a proof of weakness, and Cross was sufficiently acute to divine as much. Still, that was not required to strengthen his self-confidence, and he dryly came back with the words:

"So ye say, sir, but mere saying is not proof, and time will tell the true tale."

While speaking, the Englishman brushed a portfolio and some loose papers from the round table, then rested one hip upon its polished surface, swinging his foot airily as he nodded toward the easy-chair nearer the grate.

"Better be seated, my dear sir," he said, with off hand politeness. "I've quite a little to talk over, and your limbs may grow weary before I come under the wire, a winner."

Eustace Reeves flushed with anger, but managed to choke it back. He was growing cooler, even though he more nearly realized what an awkward tool his fingers had drawn from a rusty sheath.

"If you have anything more to offer in excuse for your attempt to play me foul, Cross, out with it, in a 'ump!'" he said, sternly, making no move toward accepting that deliciously impudent invitation.

"Hard words butter no parsnips, me covey, is a saying we 'ave hacross the water, and there's another about paying through the nose, which just fits on to a gent who lets his temper run away with his politeness. No offense intended, your Honor, of course, but merely a hint at random."

Eustace Reeves grew pale again, and there was more than anger in his black eyes as he stared at this impudent being.

"Who are you, anyway, man?"

"You called me hin name hand hout hof name, me lud," retorted the fellow, with another of his oily chuckles. "You called me hass, which Hi deny. You called me Jemmy Cross, which Hi hadmit. Has for the rest—hopen your hears, me lud, hand ye'll be wiser for hit."

The fellow paused for a bit, as though to arrange his words in fitting order, then spoke briskly enough, once more dropping his cock-nevish accent, speaking like a man of fair education.

"I am an Englishman, sir, and my parents were named Cross. I was born and reared within sound of Bow Bells, I may state, but I was s'ill a slip of a lad when I left the streets for the stables. And then, by a streak of good luck, I was taken on as under-boy by the trainer of the great Lechmere stables."

Despite his really strong nerve, Eustace Reeves gave a sudden start at this: and inwardly cursed himself for so doing, an instant later, for he saw how pointedly Jem Cross emphasized that title.

"What have I to do with all this, you idiot?" he harshly broke forth, more to cover that start than aught else, perhaps. "If I had any such

curiosity, couldn't I glean the information from any rogues' gallery?"

"Maybe so, your Honor. I don't profess to be nearly so well posted on such matters," admitted Cross, with a bow of mock modesty.

It was a fair hit, and Eustace Reeves felt that it might be the part of wisdom to admit as much. He surely could not hope to gain his ends through bullying or blackguarding with an opponent like this.

"I owe you another, Mr. Cross," he said, with an admirably-counterfeited yawn, leaning against the stuffed back of that easy-chair. "Will you continue, please? Remember the work we still have in hand."

Jockey Jem grinned anew, but let the opening pass unimproved. If he could fetch this man to his terms without using actual threats, so much the better, and so much the safer for both parties.

"I was a bright, knowledgeable lad, if I do blow me own horn, sir, and from the day I entered those stables, I made up me mind to climb the ladder as fast as I could safely feel me footing. And so, in course of time, me lud, I mounted step by step, from stable-boy to under-groom, exerciser, second and first jockey, and even took a hand at the training as I grew older, sir.

"My prospects in life were growing still brighter, me lud, when the grand smash took place. If the Lechmere Stables had held on for another year or two—but they didn't, worse luck!"

Through all this Eustace Reeves had been exhibiting irritation, although he managed to hold himself under control. But now, as Jockey Jem broke off his speech to heave a monumental sigh, he interposed:

"What interest can I feel in all this past history? Or how can your loss of a position, years ago, of course, concern my affairs?"

"Meaning the business which brought me here to-night, Mr. Reeves?"

"Of course! What has such rot got to do with it, I ask you?"

"Pretty much everything, me lud, if you look at it from the right point of view," declared Jockey Jem, showing more than ever of his tobacco-defiled teeth. "For instance: Lord Lechmere never made public the name or description of that thief, his assassin, but he did write down a complete statement, which—"

Cross paused with a broadening grin, for Eustace Reeves had drawn himself rigidly erect, his hands tightly clinched, his eyes staring, his face bleached to the dead whiteness of chalk.

Only for the space of a single breath, however. Then he rallied, and leaning his other elbow upon the stuffed back of the chair, as though this had been his only object in altering his position, Eustace Reeves quietly spoke:

"Go on, Mr. Cross. Possibly I'll begin to see the connection in time, though it is all a confused mixture of bosh and insolence, so far. You were saying?—"

"I was speaking of a certain statement which Farquhar Beresford, Lord Lechmere, baron of that ilk, wrote out with his own hand, and sealed with his own seal," deliberately spoke the ex-groom, slipping from the table to the floor, and taking a folded document from his breast.

"Never mind just how it chanced, me lud, but that statement fell into my hands, and has been jealously guarded ever since. I have it here, for— You can look, me lud, but hands off!"

Jockey Jem opened the paper, holding it where the gaslight fell fairly across those plainly written lines, near enough to Eustace Reeves for his keen eyes to make out the full meaning, but far enough from his hands to foil a covetous clutch, in case such should be attempted.

Beyond a doubt, the gentleman was putting a strong restraint upon himself, yet he could not entirely conceal his almost terrible interest in those written lines from the watchful eyes of the Englishman, who was taking swift note of each change, each light or shadow.

Only long enough for his employer to take in the general purport of the statement, without having time for reading each line in proper order; then Jem Cross drew back the paper, folding it as before, his face wrinkling up before a low, malicious laugh.

"That may be nothing more than a rank forgery," Reeves said, in far more steady tones than his employee was ready to give him credit for.

"'Tis genuine, me lud! There are still living hundreds of people who can make oath to the handwriting of Lord Lechmere."

"Well, granting that the document is genuine, just for argument, my pretty fellow, what disposition do you intend making of it?"

"I mean to sell it, if I can get my own price," came the quick, yet cool response as Jockey Jem carefully stowed the paper away in its former place of hiding, rebuttoning his coat at the top.

"And if you fail to meet with so generous a purchaser?"

"Then I'll place it in the hands of a smart

law-firm. I've got one already picked out, me lud," declared Cross, with another grin.

Eustace Reeves lowered his long lashed lids, gazing at the floor for a brief space, like one inwardly debating a point of some little importance.

The emotion he had betrayed when Jockey Jem first sprung that surprise upon him, had vanished. His face was pale and grave, but it could not be said to show either fear or anger, just then.

Yet the ex-groom seemed fully confident that matters were coming his way, now, and leaning carelessly against the edge of the round table, he patiently awaited the pleasure of his employer.

Presently Mr. Reeves looked up, to ask:

"You say you are willing to sell that document, Cross?"

"It only lacks a buyer, at my own figures, sir."

"At what figures do you value it, my friend?"

"Two thousand pounds—no less!"

"Ten thousand dollars, eh?" slowly said Reeves, one hand lifting to pinch and pull at his lower lip. "A good round sum, yet not so extortionate as it might be, perhaps."

"Then you are willing to buy the paper, me lud?"

"I might be, if—how many other people know about this statement, though?"

"Never another, sir," came the instant reply. "I knew 'twould come in play, some time, but until I found the right hour, and right person, talking could only lessen the value of my discovery. Only your eyes and mine, among those now living, have ever seen the writing, sir."

"And the girl? What in relation to her?"

"Shall be yours, when the solid cash becomes mine."

"But I haven't so much ready cash on hand, my friend."

"You have enough at your banker's, though," quickly declared the ex-groom, beginning to betray his covetous excitement now that there seemed to be a fair prospect of succeeding in his bold scheme. "Draw me a check, sir, and as soon as it is cashed, and stowed safely away in me kicks, I'll hand you the pap'r."

"And show me where the girl is hidden, of course?"

"That, too, me lud. She belongs to the little deal, ye know, sir!"

Eustace Reeves remained in silent thought for a brief space, but then he crossed over to the table, drawing inkstand and quill pen toward him with one hand, while the other drew a narrow check-book from an inner pocket.

With quick, steady fingers he filled out a check for the amount named by Jockey Jem, drying the ink with a blotter, then glancing over the slip before tearing it from the book.

Nothing could be more methodical, and no living man could have betrayed less emotion than did Eustace Reeves just then.

Still retaining possession of the check, he drew forward a sheet of note-paper, upon which he rapidly wrote a receipt, stating that the signer had received payment in full to date.

"Are you willing to sign this, Mr. Cross?" he said, with icy politeness, drawing to one side as he pointed at the paper last written, lying near the edge of the table. "If so, I think we may call the bargain as good as made."

The Englishman drew nearer, his covetous eyes turning from the check to the receipt, and bending over to see with more distinctness, he glanced over those boldly written lines.

As he did this, Eustace Reeves picked up a heavy metal paper-weight upon which his right hand had rested in seeming carelessness, and dealt Jockey Jem a terrible blow on the back of his head!

With a hoarse, gurgling sound, the ex-groom flung up his hands, reeled back, then falling like a log to the floor, flat on his back.

Dropping his novel weapon which had served his ends so well, Eustace Reeves cast a fierce glance toward the door and window, fairly holding his breath as he listened to see if that heavy fall had awakened any alarm.

But no such warning came to his ears, and dropping to his knees by the side of his still quivering victim, he slipped a hand into Jockey Jem's bosom, feeling for and securing the damning document, to secure which he had been willing to commit murder.

With a low, hoarse snarl, Eustace Reeves sprung over to the grate, holding the paper over the flames as he looked back at his victim.

CHAPTER X.

PLAYING A BOLD HAND.

TURNING his head that way, caused Eustace Reeves to make a miscalculation, and while the flames caught one corner of the opened paper, another tongue of fire lapped his wrist, and caused him to jerk his hand involuntarily back.

As he did this, the swift action extinguished the burning paper, and as eyes met hand and its prize, a sudden change came over the man.

"Why should I?" flashed through his busy brain, and then his fingers swiftly crushed out the lingering sparks.

Only one corner was destroyed, and none of

the writing had been injured in the least. Barely pausing long enough to assure himself of this fact, Eustace Reeves refolded the document, slipping it into an inner pocket, then once more stared at that ghastly shape lying upon the floor, a pool of blood slowly enlarging about that bullet-shaped head.

Was this death?

Jockey Jem lay motionless, just as he had fallen after that blind reel and stagger. One leg was partly doubled up beneath him. A hand was hidden by his body. His coarse, brutal face was slightly distorted from the pain he had felt during those first instants. But now—

Surely he was dead!

For the first time Eustace Reeves began to wonder how he was to dispose of this terrible evidence of crime.

Until then he had held but one thought, one purpose. He must secure immediate possession of that damning document, or all his carefully laid plans would come to naught!

It was a situation which might well have unnerved even a strong man, but with each minute that passed, Eustace Reeves was gaining both in mind and in body: the first was growing clearer, the last stronger and more capable of work.

He tiptoed across the room, pausing at the door which led into the hall, listening with all his powers. No unusual sound greeted his ears.

None of the servants had heard that fall, else they would surely be astir by this time!

"All's well in that direction, then," he muttered, barely above his breath, then turning low the gas-jet, leaving the room in obscurity.

He slipped behind the shade, silently lifting the window far enough for one finger to catch part of the shutter. He gazed forth, across the street, then up and down the thoroughfare as far as possible from one in his position.

"No one astir, and certainly not right here," was his verdict as he closed the shutter, lowered the sash, then drew back from under the linen shade.

He turned up the gas a little higher, then stood gazing down upon his victim. A slight shiver ran over his person at the thought, but he instantly drove it away, stooping over to rest a hand above that heart.

There was no throbbing. Not even the faintest tremor. Surely the rascal was dead!

Drawing back, Eustace Reeves scowled darkly as he gazed around the apartment, trying to arrange matters to his liking.

His face brightened a bit as he noticed the safe, still standing open, just as he had left it when taking out the money to pay off his villainous tool. Surely—

Right there he found the main cue, and with that for a foundation, building up the minor details was easy enough for a man with such a shrewd brain.

As his first move, Eustace Reeves grasped the paper-weight and struck Jockey Jem another terrible blow on the bare head. Blood flew out in a little shower, but he cared not for that, and there was a look of fierce malice in his eyes, rather than any signs of flinching or of remorse.

Springing lightly across to the safe, Reeves scattered a few papers on the floor, then opened the money-drawer and emptied it. A portion he scattered on the floor, and the rest he placed near the hand of that ghastly shape, just as though it had fallen from his unnerved fingers when he was stricken down by the one he was in the act of robbing!

The roll of bills which he had paid Jockey Jem for services rendered, was fished out from its hiding-place, crumpled up in a loose wad, then thrust into a side pocket of his sack coat, the ends of a bill or two showing as the ex-groom lay in the gas light.

All this was performed with marvelous rapidity, and then, removing his shoes, Eustace Reeves opened the door, passing from the hallway up the carpeted stairs to his own chamber.

No light was burning here, but he cared little for that; he could work fully as well in the darkness.

He removed his outer garments, flinging them into a closet, then bringing forth another entire suit. Of these, he simply donned a pair of trowsers, fastening only the top button, leaving the braces hanging loosely at his hips.

Hastily putting his bed in disorder, as though he had retired for the night, and been drawn unceremoniously forth by a midnight alarm, the cunning schemer once more descended the stairs and entered the library, where Jockey Jem still lay so death-like.

Then Eustace Reeves raised the heavy easy-chair, letting it fall again with a resounding jar, at the same time shouting forth at the top of his voice:

"Thieves! Burglars! Help—this way—the library!"

He sprung to the door, flinging it wide, repeating his excited cries as he gained the hall, rousing the servants and his nephew who made his home under the same roof.

The alarm was instant, and the next few minutes were full of confusion, and the master seemed more deeply agitated than any of the rest.

He brokenly told of being aroused from sleep

by sounds below stairs, and hurrying down, had discovered a stranger in the act of rifling the safe, which, by some unaccountable means, he had succeeded in opening.

"He heard me, and started my way with curses," he added, growing a little calmer, as it seemed. "I didn't—I hit him—what with, I don't exactly know, but—"

"With this paper-weight, I reckon," said his nephew, who just then sighted that article lying near the supposed burglar.

But he dropped it as quickly, for a red stain came off on his fingers, and mingled with the blotch were human hairs!

Deeming that he had shown sufficient excitement to account for the part he claimed to have played, Eustace Reeves changed his tactics, seemingly smothering his emotions, becoming once more his usual cool, shrewd self.

"The police must be informed, and without further delay," he declared, bidding Arthur Henderson, his nephew, hasten forth to give the alarm. "Tell the first officer you find to call the ambulance. Tell him—Dead burglar!" breaking off with a sharp gasp, as if of emotion.

The young man hastened away, without stopping to complete his costume, and Reeves sent a couple of men-servants away on much the same mission. Since he was so terribly excited—why should he not be?—of course he could not act as coolly as he might under ordinary circumstances!

He was standing guard at the library door when the police wagon came rattling up in front of the house, and he greeted the officers at the threshold, still in apparent agitation such as a private citizen might naturally display at being forced to take the law into his own hands.

Still, Eustace Reeves was far too shrewd a schemer to greatly overdo the matter, and said just enough to make his winning nearly certain.

But a terrible surprise awaited him when the officers entered the library, and one of them, a surgeon who naturally accompanied the ambulance on such an indefinite call, knelt beside the body to make a preliminary examination.

"The fellow is badly injured, but there is life remaining," was the brief verdict given by the police surgeon.

Eustace Reeves turned deathly pale and drew back with an involuntary shiver as he heard these words, but, fortunately for him, the officers were busy with a professional inspection of the room, and neither of them noticed his alarm.

With a desperate effort of will he covered his agitation over, and nerved himself to bear the very worst.

Alive! After those two terrible blows!

Would he ever rally sufficiently to tell his side of the story?

Yet the would-be murderer held his voice under control as he asked the police surgeon a question:

"Will he recover, do you think, officer? Will he—Oh, save his life if it lies in your power, my dear sir! I wouldn't have his blood upon my hands for untold gold!"

The surgeon glanced up with a grim smile. Such sentiments sounded oddly enough, coming from the lips of a man who had done his level best to slay. And yet he thought he could understand.

"His skull is fractured, badly, Mr. Reeves, but he may possibly recover. Yet any ordinary skull would have been shattered like an eggshell, with far less force than you must have exercised."

"I was so terribly excited, sir!" muttered the other, huskily. "And when he turned and saw me, I thought—Surely he was armed, sir?"

"With pistol and slung-shot, yes. If you had given him time enough to draw either—well, it's better this way, I imagine!"

Eustace Reeves drew back, with a sigh of relief, which surely sounded natural enough under the circumstances. Surely he had narrowly escaped the dread fate which had overtaken this miserable sinner!

As nothing further could be done for the injured man there, he was lifted to a litter, then borne out to the ambulance.

Mr. Reeves said he would dress and follow after, to set his natural fears at rest as to the outcome of this unfortunate affair.

It was not thought necessary to leave an officer at the house, since it had not yet become a case for the coroner; and thus freed from eyes which might prove dangerous to his as yet incomplete plans, Eustace Reeves ordered his servants back to bed, requesting his nephew to follow their example.

When this was done, he proceeded to his own chamber, where he finished dressing, taking care to lock the closet-door which contained the suit which he had worn when meeting Jockey Jem, after emptying the pockets, stowing away that precious document in his breast-pocket.

Lingering only long enough to restore money and papers to the safe, the door of which he locked, Eustace Reeves left the house, walking briskly away, as though bound for the station

to which Jockey Jem had been conveyed, according to promise.

Instead of this, however, his present destination lay in quite another quarter of the city, for he finally brought up in front of a large residence in an aristocratic quarter, up the stone steps of which he nimbly ran, pulling almost fiercely at the bell.

He was forced to repeat this more than once, for the hour was very late, and the house in utter darkness. But finally a sleepy servant opened the door, of whom he at once demanded admittance.

"Go tell Mrs. Devereux I must see her, at once, on business of the utmost importance," he said, hastily, as he crossed the threshold. "Say that Mr. Reeves is waiting—and don't fall asleep on the way!"

In a house supplied with all modern conveniences, it was an easy matter to produce light sufficient for the emergency, and a minute later Eustace Reeves was in an elegantly-furnished drawing-room, impatiently waiting for the mistress of that mansion to make her appearance.

He knew that his message would be speedily obeyed, but even before he dared hope for so much, the door opened, to admit a woman, garbed in a dressing-gown, but looking rarely beautiful for all that.

Perhaps it was the dim light, or possibly the excitement such an unusual summons must naturally cause, but Eustace Reeves thought he had never before fairly realized what a superbly beautiful woman this Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux really was.

"You called me out of bed, Reeves," she began, abruptly, her blonde brows lowering in a frown. "What has gone wrong, then?"

"Everything, almost!" viciously snarled the man in reply.

"What do you mean by 'everything'? Speak out, can't you, man alive!"

"Well, for one thing, madam, I've seen a paper left by Lord Lechmere, charging Giulia Raimando with stabbing him, and stealing his daughter, who, if still living, would be the baroness!"

CHAPTER XI.

MEETING AFTER MANY YEARS.

The Go-lightly Detective gave his brief summary in quiet, almost matter-of-fact tones, but strong emphasis was not needed to powerfully impress his auditor.

Austin McRustie's face showed the amazement its owner was feeling, but this came more because of a complete stranger's swift intuition, than because those words conveyed aught new to the mine-owner.

The merest twinkle crept into Gustave Lucksinger's blue eyes as he quietly took notes, and upon his mental record went the words:

"He knew all that before, but is marveling how I came to find it out so quickly!"

Austin McRustie quickly rallied from the shock those coolly-spoken words had given him, but there was a perceptible tremor in his tones when he came to speak:

"Don't say the likes o' that, man, for you're shooting terribly wide of the mark! She never—How could she do like that?"

"She has money, and with gold in hand, even a woman can work wonders in a city like this, my friend."

"But I don't—Oh, drop that link, pardner! 'Twas just a case of simple grabs, I reckon, and I was a fool for flashing my roll where hungry eyes could glimpse it."

German Gus listened quietly, his face betraying no emotion either way. Then, when McRustie broke off, his dark eyes drooping before that grave gaze, he said:

"It is for you to decide, sir, of course. Still, if I am to undertake this case, there must be no limitations set, now or later on. If you object to my following the trail so closely, I must decline to set foot along it at all."

Austin McRustie shifted nervously in his seat. His face grew red, then faded to several shades below its ordinary hue. Plainly he was ill at ease in mind, but German Gus never for an instant doubted what his decision would be, nor was his judgment in error.

"Well, pardner, I do reckon you haven't missed the mark by more'n a mile or two," he finally broke forth, "but what I'd like to know first is this: how in thunder and-guns did you come to jump all over the truth that fashion?"

Lucksinger laughed softly, for the face of this bluff, off-hand fellow from the breezy West was an interesting as well as amusing study just then.

"Merely by putting two and two together, Mr. McRustie," he said, easily. "For one thing, those thugs didn't act like men who were simply out for the dust they might find about your clothes."

"They worked hard enough for it, though!"

"Too hard, don't you think, sir? They meant murder, and at least one of them risked his own neck in trying to do just that: no ordinary thief would have used his knife when he could hear the police coming, and he had a way clear for retreat."

"That sounds mighty near right, pardner,

but—even yet it comes hard to think such truck about a woman whom you have held—Only for the little girl, I'd let the whole thing drop like a hot potato!"

Gustave Lucksinger bowed with gravity, then said:

"That is as you deem best, Mr. McRustie. As I did not seek your case, neither will I try to retain it against your will. Shall we let all drop, and consider the matter has never been broached at all?"

The detective spoke as though he fully meant each word, and that seeming willingness to draw out only made McRustie the more eager to retain his services, which was precisely what German Gus figured upon.

"If I was a fool for a bit, pardner, is that a sign you want to make a match-team of us?" he bluntly asked, reaching forth a hand for the customary grip of renewal. "You can't draw out now, unless you can beat me at a foot-race!"

"Vell, dot seddles so much! Und now—vhas I hef to vight you, pynder resdt uff dose vellers, eh?"

"Fight me?" echoed McRustie, but then catching at the right idea an instant later. "That's all right, pardner. A man can make a john-donkey of himself once in a way, I reckon, but if he does it twice handrunning, that's different!"

"Just a little back, you sort o' jumped on my tender spot with both your feet, and I couldn't help flinching. But now—well, a man is worse than a fool if he hires a doctor, then lies about his symptoms!"

Hardly the most lucid explanation, perhaps, but German Gus caught at the right meaning, and feeling that he had overcome the most serious obstacle in the trail which he already took great interest in, he spoke once more:

"That begins to sound more like solid business, my good friend, and if you can stick to the same schedule all the way through, I think I can promise you a safe if not speedy trip to success."

"All right, pardner! I thought I could run the thing by my lonesome, but now—well, I find I need aid from a cool head and clear brain right about now! And if you haven't got them both, then I'll quit guessing and turn to something else for a living."

"Wait, please," gravely said Lucksinger. "If this trail should lead to the guilty ones, they must meet the punishment deserved."

"If they deserve punishment, let it fall, then!"

"Whether they are male or female?"

Austin McRustie hesitated a bit at this, but then gave a positive nod. His brief weakness had passed by, and he was once more a man.

Those blue eyes gave a swift flash of fire, but German Gus showed no other signs of excitement, and his tones were grave as he spoke:

"Go on, then, my good friend. I agree to help you find and punish this woman who has no living thumb upon her left hand!"

It was just as well to have a complete understanding, perhaps, but it now seemed as though German Gus had once more stepped to the wrong side of the line in his wish to clear up everything while progressing.

Sharp and stern came the words from Austin McRustie's lips:

"Not just that, pardner! I'm not on a woman-hunt, and you might as well understand that at the start. So far as I'm concerned, the Madame can go scot free, to enjoy whatever may be left of her plunder."

"If this is true, why employ me, Mr. McRustie?" gravely asked the detective.

"Because I find I need help to run the Madame down, although I'm dead sure she's hanging up her shingle in this very village," came the instant response.

"Why do you wish to find her, if not to punish?"

"Not for that, I say again. All I want is to get back the child left me by my first wife. With her safe, the Madame may go free."

German Gus had been resting an elbow upon the mantelpiece, thumb and forefinger slowly rubbing over smooth-shaven cheek and chin, but now his hand fell, to rest lightly upon the curiously carven casket of ivory, and a faint smile caused his lips to quiver for an instant.

His big blue eyes might have told tales had McRustie been able to gaze into their depths, but this he could not do, just then.

A brief silence reigned, broken at length by the mine-owner, who doubtless considered that tender point finally disposed of, since he made no further allusion to it.

"Well, pardner, I reckon I'd better go back and tell you just how it happened to come so. It'll not take long, and when you know just as much as I do, maybe you'll know a heap sight more!"

German Gus gave a little chuckle at that rather Irish observation, but McRustie was in sober earnest.

"That's all right, pardner, even if it does give you a bump in passing over it. You'll know more, because you'll know better how to make that knowledge count. See?"

Lucksinger nodded assent. The point was plainly perceptible now, and McRustie was

talking better sense than he had received credit for.

"Well, I came here to Chicago, more because I didn't know where else to turn, than through any hope of striking the trail I'd lost for so many years," said the mine-owner, speaking like one getting down to sober business at last.

"This isn't my first visit here, of course, for I knew that when a party wishes to get lost to all others, a busy crowd is just the place to strike for. But I hadn't struck color in Chicago *then*, nor did I dare hope to prove more lucky this tackle.

"Still, I kept on the stir, pretty much all the time I wasn't eating and sleeping, and then my time came!"

"You found the Madame, then?"

"I'm telling ye, pardner. I was walking along without much thought of anything in particular, when there came one of those pretty little jams: where the street fills up, you know, and all hands take to cussing and talking fight.

"Of course they never do more than chaw wind, but the racket was enough to wake me up, for I'm still green-country enough to think a man never says what he isn't ready to back up with muscle.

"It was all-eyes-open with me, as I say, and when I lay back for a reserved seat, so I might take the sport all in, I saw—on the further edge of that blessed jam, seated in a 'way-up toney rig, with monkey-dressed driver—the *Madame*!"

The Go Lightly Detective's brain had out-speeded McRustie's tongue, and he knew just what that discovery was bound to be; yet he exhibited a gratifying degree of surprised interest, before asking:

"You are positive, sir? There was no chance for a case of mistaken identity, for instance?"

McRustie laughed, short and bitterly.

" Didn't I tell you, pardner, that the time was when I fairly worshiped every square inch of that woman? And having lived with her for so many years, loving her *that way*, am I a man to mistake another woman for the *Madame*?"

" Still, after eight years! Even a woman must change her looks in that length of time, sir."

" This woman hasn't, then. I had a fair look at her profile, and then at her full face as something caused her to turn squarely my way. It was the *Madame*, to a dead moral!"

" And she—why did you not join her, then?"

" For a mighty good reason, pardner: I simply couldn't do it."

"How so?"

"I'm just going to tell you, pardner. Maybe I yelped out in my great surprise: I don't know how *that* was, but I *do* know that the *Madame* turned my way, and I heard her give a little squeal as she recognized my face. I reckon it wasn't much for handsome, just then!"

" Well, I gave a jump her way, but the jam lay between. I saw her urge the driver on—I saw him draw his silk, and the cattle make a plunge—then I gave a wild-bull rush right into the thick of the crush!"

" The worst step you could have taken, man!" ejaculated Lucksinger.

" I reckon you're right, pardner, and I wasn't long in finding that out for my own self," moodily added McRustie. "First, I knew, I didn't know anything! I was knocked down and used as a foot-wiper, and I can't tell you just *how* I was pulled out of that nasty mix."

" That was a week ago this morning. I was able to hustle in little less than an hour, for no bones had been broken, but my chance had come and gone. The *Madame* was off, and try as I might I couldn't strike her trail!"

" The carriage and livery: surely those clews ought to be enough for identifying the owner?"

" I reckon they would, but I couldn't call to mind any one thing plainly enough to set 'em out, don't you see? All I took in was the woman: the rest was like a dream-shadow."

" I tried my level, as you may imagine, pardner, but it wasn't any use. No person I dared speak to, seemed able to give me so much as a hint, and though I've kept on the go night and day, with hardly a stray hour wasted in snoozing, I haven't been able to find what I lost in that one holy minute!"

German Gus thoughtfully fingered the ivory casket for a minute or two in grave silence, but then he spoke:

" Well, this assault ought to furnish you with a clew. Of course you believe that was instigated by the woman you term the *Madame*?"

Austin McRustie flushed hotly, then grew pale again. He seemed at a loss for words, but only for a few seconds; then he exploded:

" No, I don't, won't admit that! She was my wife—or *ce*!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRET HELD BY THE CASKET.

It was the same old obstacle that German Gus had flattered himself had been cast aside, never to obtrude itself more. But he saw that his fiery-tempered client was hardly in a suitable state for pressing that tender point, just then, and wisely he let it rest for the moment.

For the first time since that interview began, Gustave Lucksinger assumed an air and manner which chimed in with the idea generally entertained as to the customs of a genuine detective.

Taking a seat, he produced a small note-book and pencil, jotting down an occasional item as he put questions and received answers.

Those queries were mainly concerning the personal appearance of the *Madame* and the missing daughter, all of which Austin McRustie answered to the best of his ability.

His second wife was a woman of more than ordinary stature; one whom the term "queenly" best described, though he gave both height and weight as he remembered them.

Her hair was black—not dull, or coarse, as such hued hair generally is, but soft and silken, with a gloss which, under certain lights, gave forth a dim shimmer of red-tinged blue. There was a natural wave or ripple in its growth, which brushing could not subdue.

Her complexion had been marvelously clear, although the *Madame* was a pronounced brunette. There was ever a natural flush upon her cheeks, and only when before the footlights did she make use of powder or paints.

"She looked like one of them high-toned, blue-blooded Spanish women, pardner," was his summing up. "Not that I believe she had any Greaser blood in her, though; her talk was too white English for that, to my mind, although she could sling Spanish equal to a printed book!"

"Did she speak other foreign languages?" gently inquired Gustave, smiling blandly, looking more boyish than ever, just then. "Italian, for instance?"

"If she could, I never found it out, pardner. Why do you ask that?"

"For information, merely," came the easy response. "Now, tell me something more about your missing daughter, please."

That proved to be an easier task than the other, although McRustie made his description clear enough to satisfy the detective.

Myrtle McRustie was a semi-brunette, with dark chestnut hair, and eyes of the deepest, darkest blue.

When taken from her father, she had been a little over ten years of age, but remarkably well-grown, and looking several years older, as the detective could judge for himself; and with that, the father produced a photograph from an inner pocket.

Gustave Lucksinger studied this carefully for a minute or two, then passed it back, quietly asking:

"And the *Madame*: have you no picture of her, my good friend?"

"No, I haven't," with a slight frown. "I tried often enough to get her to pose for one, but 'twas no use. She just wouldn't, and that settled it!"

"No doubt she had her reasons, although it's been my experience with the fair sex that one has more trouble to get them to refrain, rather than to sit! Still—from your description of the *Madame*, it ought not to be so difficult a matter, this finding her again. Such remarkable women are apt to attract notice, and—well, Mr. McRustie?"

The detective broke off abruptly, for his client was shifting uneasily in his seat, his face betraying a growing embarrassment which sat with very poor grace upon a visage so naturally frank.

"Well, pardner, you only asked me how the *Madame* looked when she levanted, didn't you?"

"Certainly; but since you recognized her at a glance, only one week ago, she could not have undergone any material change, of course?"

"Not as to form or features, perhaps, but—I say, pardner!"

"Well?"

"I was hunting for a *brunette*, and I found a *blonde*! Her hair was black as a crow, then, but now it's yellow as new corn!"

German Gus laughed aloud. He could not well help it, that face bore such an expression of distress, mingled with disgust.

"The *Madame* was an actress, remember, my good friend. Or—did you say she sung in opera?"

Austin McRustie gave a start at this, but it was merely because that question came so sharply, almost sternly.

"No, I didn't say *that*. In fact, the *Madame* couldn't sing for sour apples," he bluntly declared.

"You heard her make the attempt, perhaps?"

"No, but she told me so, often enough. The little girl was great on a ballad, and we both tried to coax the *Madame* to join in as she played for Myrtle; but 'twas no use. She simply couldn't, and so she wouldn't."

Gustave made another minute note, as though he found that fact of sufficient importance for record. Then he quietly said:

"As to the change of color in *Madame's* hair, that is easily accounted for, my friend. Such things are thoroughly understood in stageland, and your wife was an actress when you married her. Still, it is remarkable that you recognized her so instantly."

"You never loved a woman as I once loved the *Madame*, pardner, or it wouldn't hit you so

hard," gravely answered McRustie. "Still, I don't say I mightn't have made myself believe I was off my nut, only for that look she gave me. That told me, plainer than words, she was my runaway wife, and that she was none too well pleased at finding me still in the land of the living, either!"

"Doubtless she bleached her hair as a disguise against just such a recognition. Pity you did not act as wisely, though!"

"That's just it, you see," declared McRustie, with a little frown. "The change in hair gave me such a start that I froze fast in my tracks until it was too late to act otherwise. Only for that—but why talk? I didn't take to cover and lay low, as I ought to have done, and just because of my fool acting, I've lost her again!"

"Just as the *Madame* made a fatal mistake in her turn, when chance, or your cry, caused her eyes to turn in your direction. She betrayed by her face, what her altered hair might have concealed. Is it not so, my friend?"

"There you've hit it, pardner!" exclaimed the mine-owner, bringing an open palm forcibly against his long, muscular thigh. "If ever a woman's eyes and face gave her away, those of the *Madame* did right then and right there!"

"It was not a love-look, then?" softly insinuated the detective.

McRustie broke into a laugh, harsh and bitter. He made no further attempt to conceal his real emotions, now, for this plausible-spoken detective had won his way fairly into his confidence.

The old wound might have scarred over by the passage of time, but it was still sore beneath the surface.

"A 'love-look'?" echoed the mine-owner, after a brief space. "Don't you stay awake nights, pardner, longing for just such another look of love as *that one was*!"

"It was hatred, then, perhaps?"

"Hatred and fear combined—yes! I reckon 'twas pretty much as though a ghost had sprung up right in her path, pardner. Maybe she thought I'd cashed in my checks—no fault of hers that I didn't, that time!"

"Still, a woman of her caliber would hardly have failed to learn just how you were progressing, even though she felt forced to flee."

"Of course, she'd find out, but after so many years—eight of 'em, and each one longer'n an ordinary lifetime! during which I never gave sign nor sound, so far as she could know! Well, wouldn't it come natural enough for her to reason that I'd really hopped the twig, pardner?"

"And all the more easy because her heart was inclined that way," coolly assented German Gus.

This seemed an unkind cut, particularly when given by a professed friend, and a slight flush told how keenly McRustie felt it. But he gave no other sign of resenting the insinuation, simply saying:

"That's about it, I reckon, pardner. Time was when love-looks came in plenty from those big eyes, but *this one—ugh!* It cut to the bone, and fairly took the bark off!"

"Well, you have one faint consolation, sir. Unless this fair one of the golden locks had cause for fearing you, she hardly would have betrayed such hatred as you describe."

"Twas the *Madame*, easy enough. Now, do you really reckon you can find her, pardner?"

"Unless she has fled from Chicago since that passing glimpse, I can safely promise you that much," came the prompt response. "A woman of her description can be found far more readily than one cast in a commoner mold. The main difficulty will come after locating her, though."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, suppose she persistently denies ever having figured as your particular *Madame*?" slowly suggested Lucksinger, speaking with a purpose which he kept under cover for the moment.

McRustie bit at the bait without hesitation, showing his strong teeth in a half-fierce smile before saying:

"Place me face to face with her, and I'll answer for the rest. She might lie me down, only for one thing: *her thumb!*"

German Gus gave a quick start as of surprise, although this was the very point his questions were leading up to.

"Ach! how gomes dot I vorgeds so mooch? Vhas I a vool growing, I vonders me all oafer?"

It was a neat bit of flattery, and man of the world though he rather prided himself on being, Austin McRustie was not proof against it.

He chuckled grimly, then added in more serious tones:

"A fellow can't think of everything, pardner, and no doubt you'd have come round to that, in time, even if I hadn't given you a lift. But, mind you, man, the *Madame* is a bit of a tiger-cat when her ebenezer rises to the top notch, and you want to keep both eyes open if you happen to tackle her about that thumb when I'm not at your elbow."

German Gus bowed his thanks, then almost meekly asked:

"Will you allow me to look at that clew again, Mr. McRustie?"

"Why not?" and the mine-owner at once drew forth the velvet case from where he had stowed it away. "Mighty slick bit of work, isn't it?"

Gustave gave the artificial thumb a close inspection, keeping silence for a few moments. Then he said:

"Well, if she of the blonde locks is not the woman we're hunting for, all she'll need do to prove an *alibi*, is to show a perfect left hand!"

"Look out that she don't exhibit her hand with a knife in her grip, pardner! That's a way the Madame has, as my hide can testify!"

Gustave Lucksinger abruptly left his seat, to reach down the ivory casket from the mantelpiece. As he resumed his chair, he said, with eyes once more inspecting that artificial member:

"Yes, 'tis an odd work of art, and made by a master in his particular line. Still, there's a limit which no artificer can pass, and Dame Nature can discount art in this respect."

"I reckon so, but—what's coming, now?" bluntly asked McRustie, as the detective passed that thumb back to his hand.

"Nothing more startling than putting one of my little curiosities up for your admiration—or otherwise," coolly answered the detective, drawing forth a pocketbook, from which he extracted a tiny silver key, attached to a blue ribbon.

"You praised up that work of art, but this casket holds a secret which I think is even more remarkable. Rather oddly, too, it runs pretty much in that same line of oddities."

While saying this, German Gus was inserting the silver key in a corresponding aperture, which was hidden from view until his trained touch caused an apparently solid leaf to move aside, exposing the tiny lock.

Turning the key, he lifted the ivory lid, revealing a satin-lined interior, where rested a small bottle filled with some colorless liquid.

And something more!

As he held up the vial of alcohol, Austin McRustie gave a low cry and an amazed start, for there he beheld almost an exact counterpart of the artificial thumb which he had cherished so jealously through so many long years, as his sole clew to a faithless wife!

"Nature before art, every time! What is your opinion, Mr. McRustie?"

CHAPTER XIII.

NATURE AND ART IN COMPARISON.

AUSTIN MC RUSTIE sat staring at that inclosed member, much as though it possessed the fascinating powers of the fabled basilisk.

There was no room left for doubt. It was a human thumb, perfect in every respect save where, in being severed from its parent hand, the weapon used had failed to make a clean, smooth cut.

On his part, Gustave Lucksinger was cool and composed, a faint smile moving his lips as he gazed upon the grim secret given up by the casket of ivory.

His was the expression of a connoisseur, and one might almost have thought he viewed that ghastly relic with eyes of affection!

"An odd coincidence, isn't it, my good friend?" he said, gently, moving the bottle a little nearer his client, as though to afford a still fairer view of the severed thumb. "You and I, strangers until to-night, yet each one cherishing a handless thumb! And thumbs which bear an almost marvelous resemblance to each other, don't you think, sir?"

"I don't see—"

"The coincidence, eh? What, is there nothing peculiar in that rare fact, even, of two men, strangers, brought together as we have been, and each of us cherishing a neat little pocket-piece like these? Surely, yes, my friend!"

Austin McRustie brushed his face with a handkerchief, though the room was by no means warm. His eyes seemed fascinated by that vial and its contents even while he shrank visibly back when the detective moved it a bit closer to his face.

"One could almost make oath mine and yours came off the same hand, don't you think, friend?" softly uttered Lucksinger, still smiling.

His words seemed to break the spell which had fallen over his client, and rallying, Austin McRustie spoke almost sharply:

"What sort of game is this you're trying to play off on me, man?"

"Game? Do you call this—is it game, in United States talk, then?" innocently queried German Gus, his brows arching perplexedly.

"That's all right, pardner. You hit me right in the wind when you jumped such a riddle onto me, but I'm getting over it, now. And, to look again, I can't see the close resemblance you hinted at, either!"

Lucksinger laughed softly, giving the bottle a gentle shake, then holding it up where the gas-light was reflected through the clear glass and alcohol.

"Then I was fooled by my eyes, eh? It is not alike they are, eh? I think so—I surely do think it is like that, my friend!"

Austin McRustie, once more his natural self, reached forth a hand, speaking almost peremptorily:

"Let me take a closer look at that thing, pardner."

"With pleasure, my friend! It is well worth a closer inspection, I think me—no? And—unlike, say you? Ach! maybe that is more the fault of the medium through which it is viewed, than the fault of this, my little treasure!"

German Gus gave the bottle another gentle shake, smiling blandly upon the grim relic, then twisting the glass stopper around with thumb and forefinger, at the same time drawing back a little as the hand of his client extended nearer his treasure.

"Let me look at it, man!" impatiently added McRustie. "What are you afraid of? If you didn't mean—"

The detective deftly secured the thumb, extracting it from the alcohol, gently waving it through the air to dry off superfluous moisture.

"Patience, my good friend," he said, meanwhile. "That is very right, what you are saying: if I did not mean an exhibition, why begin an exposition? Very true—very true indeed! And so—suppose you take the trouble to compare nature with art, Mr. McRustie?"

The change of tone and manner was abrupt, but the mine-owner passed it by without comment, for with those last words Gustave Lucksinger dropped that preserved thumb into his extended hand.

Strong-nerved though he was, McRustie gave a little shiver as that contact came: the thumb felt so cold, so clammy, so deathlike!

Still, he began his examination, and the first glance showed him that no cunning trick was being played: this had once been living flesh, attached to a living hand!

He could see the skin, the flesh, the bone, the sinews, even, where a keen weapon of some sort had cut through one and all.

Not with a straight, precise cut, as a surgeon would have performed the amputation, but slightly slanting, and leaving an irregular edge of skin and torn flesh at one side: the outer edge of the thumb as it had been in life.

"It was a keen blade and a strong hand, my friend," said Lucksinger, as he leaned forward a bit, his own interest seemingly equal to that of his client, familiar though he must long since have grown with that grawsome relic. "One fierce wrench—pouf! Off came the member, and the luckless one had but a thumbless hand to use—until cunning art came to supply the loss!"

Austin McRustie gave a start and caught his breath sharply at this pointed conclusion. He drew back a bit, his eyes glowing again as they met that cool, grave gaze.

"You mean—what the Old Boy do you mean, stranger?" he demanded, harshly. "Surely, you can't think—it's hers?"

"What is it I mean, you ask, my friend? First, a comparison of art with nature, and to do that the more accurately—Pardon, please!"

Lucksinger picked up the velvet box which still lay in the mine-owner's lap, and drawing forth the artificial thumb, he placed the two side by side, turning the nails uppermost.

"Another coincidence, my good friend! Those nails: do you observe?"

Not until his attention was called that way, but then McRustie gave another involuntary start, his face paling once more.

The resemblance was little short of the marvelous, and viewing the two thumbs, one could have taken oath that the genuine had served as model for the false.

"It is not an every-day shape, sir, as you can see," pursued the Go-lightly Detective, using a forefinger to mark his words. "The nail on your specimen is long, narrow, but perceptibly broader at its base than at the other extremity. One calls that sort of finger-nail the 'tiger-cat.'

"Compare the two specimens, please. Are they not marvelously alike? The size: length, breadth, taper—all as one! A symmetrical thumb, too, though rather large for an ordinary woman. But—was your Madame an ordinary, though, good friend?"

"Why don't you talk out, man!" sternly demanded McRustie, though his face betrayed strong emotions just then. "You mean more than you are saying, and I know it! What is it, then?"

"What do I mean, you ask, Austin McRustie?" gravely echoed the detective, then adding in swifter tones: "I mean that you and I are meant to be allies!"

"You are hunting a woman to avenge a crime committed eight years ago. I am searching for a woman who stained her soul with sin just seventeen years gone by. And—another strange coincidence!—the main clew in each case is a thumbless left hand!"

His full meaning was made sufficiently clear, but Austin McRustie would not accept it, as yet. His very face showed how hopeless he deemed that fight, but he would not yield until actually obliged.

"It's odd enough, as you say, but nothing more than that, I reckon. Your woman isn't my woman, and I just know it!"

"You have reasons for that belief, of course, sir?"

"A dozen if needed, but—one is enough for me!"

"And that one, my good friend?"

"Just this, con—Ex-u-e me, pardner, but for a gentleman who talks so smooth and silky as you do, there's the keenest, rawest, bitingest edge to your tongue that I ever felt grate against the grain!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but nothing is further from my mind than to annoy or irritate you. Only—if I am to serve you at all, it can only be done through bringing the whole truth to light."

"That's all right, but this coupling seventeen years with eight isn't going to do that little job, and I just know it! Why, man, the Madame was pure as an angel when I first met up with her, and I know it!"

"If so, my friend, our investigation will clear her fair fame, rather than tarnish it further," quietly spoke the detective.

"There's no sense in going back so mighty far, though! Why, man, she was but a little girl at the date you name!"

"Wait a little, my friend," said Lucksinger, smoothly. "If so young as that, then your Josephine Tudor could not possibly be my Guilia Raimondo. But—the two thumbs! Is that a mere coincidence, then?"

"Where did you get yours, pardner? Cut it off with your own hand?"

"Am I such a venerable personage, then?" laughing softly as he cast a glance at his reflection in the mirror above the grate. "Tis just seventeen years since this masterpiece of nature was put in pickle—to speak bluntly!"

"Don't answer unless you feel like it, pardner," half sneered his client. "But, all the same, I'm sticking to my record: we can't be looking for the same woman, thumbs or no thumbs!"

"Wait, once more, I beg, my friend. You declare this Madame was innocent and pure as a lily when you first met her, yet—that thumb! It was counterfeited before that meeting, of course?"

"Well, what of that?"

"Then, if there was no dangerous secret connected with that maimed hand, why should your wife try to murder you when her loss was discovered?"

"She didn't!" with a flash of triumph in eyes and echo in his voice. "Twasn't until after she drew knife that I found out about the hand, don't you remember?"

Gustave Lucksinger frowned slightly at his slip, but quickly rallied, slightly altering his question:

"Why, then, should the Madame betray such strong emotion when her loss was discovered? Why flee from her loving husband so suddenly?"

"Well, I'd praised her for being so perfect in all respects—a model for a sculptor or artist!—that she couldn't bear to stay, now I'd exposed her deformity."

The detective smiled faintly at this somewhat labored plea, but shook his head dubiously while saying:

"I hope this may prove the correct explanation, my good friend, if only for your sake, but I am afraid 'tis of no use."

"Please compare these two thumbs, once more. Observe the shape, the size, the length of the first joint, the peculiarly-shaped nail. When you have done all this, try to make the color alike; blanch yours, or paint mine with the color of life."

"That is easily done, if you test your powers, and surely this is an occasion well worth the exertion. Have you done all this, Austin McRustie?"

Although tongue was silent, face made reply. Even though he might have tried to rebel, the mine-owner had obeyed, like one under a spell.

"You have done as I say, and you fail to note any serious difference between the two. If you were put upon oath, you would swear that only for the difference in touch, and lower end, you could not pick one away from the other—eh?"

Still silence on his part, but silence meant even more than speech, and the Go-lightly Detective was well content with results, so far.

"Very well, once again, my good friend. The Madame—revert to her charmingly-kept hands. These two nails are of odd shape; were the nails upon her hands at all different from that upon your relic? I mean in shape, of course?"

"I don't know. I never noticed."

"Which is proof positive! If different, the false from the real, you surely would have noticed that fact, and remarked upon it. For, if I remember aright, you spoke of kissing her beautiful hands so often, yet never once dreamed of an artificial thumb?"

Austin McRustie could not deny this, and remained moodily silent, but German Gus would not take the hint. He was fairly on a hot scent, now, and meant to press along it to the very end—to death, if such must be the outcome!

"It is very plain, my friend. Madame wished to avoid comment on her disfiguring loss, of course, and so took pains to have the counter-

feit made as true to nature as cunning art could arrange it. Yet—that very cunning may end in placing a noose about her throat!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF A CRIME.

AUSTIN MCRUSTIE made a sharp gesture, which fell only little short of being a blow, at the same time ejaculating:

"Stealy, pardner! Though you're shooting at the wrong mark, you're slinging lead mighty close to my wife!"

"If your wife is innocent, Mr. McRustie, neither she nor you have cause for uneasiness, so far as my sharpshooting is concerned," came the cool reply. "Must I repeat that, yet again, my good friend?"

The mine owner sunk back into his chair, with an impatient frown. It was hard to decide just what to do or to say, but the first words that offered themselves were:

"Well, what crime is it you're charging my—a woman with?"

"That is still another curious coincidence," said Lucksinger, with a queer little chuckle. "Part of that crime lies in stealing away the only child of a gentleman—a daughter, too!"

Their eyes met for a brief space, but then McRustie gave it up, and with mock resignation added the words:

"All right, pardner! Maybe you know what you're trying to get around to, but be blessed if I do!"

"Yet the inference ought to be easily drawn, sir," came the instant retort. "I believe the woman who stole the daughter of Lord Lechmere, seventeen years ago, is identically the same woman who ran away with your daughter, nine years later!"

"Then you're way off your nut, pardner, and I'm telling you so in the plainest words I can twist my tongue around! I'll never believe the Madame did any such thing, until she confesses as much of her own free will, right before the face of me—so there!"

That he meant exactly what he said, his face bore evidence. German Gus gave him full credit for being perfectly sincere, yet he had his own points to gain, and stuck closely to his line of attack.

"It is barely possible that you may be right, Mr. McRustie, and for your sake I am trying to hope that your faith is well-founded. Still, time will tell, and if the worst must come to light—well, you are a man, with all that term implies, and can stand the burden fortune measures out for your shoulders."

Abruptly rising from his chair, Gustave Lucksinger replaced the ivory casket upon the mantel, then moved across the room to a closet.

From a shelf within this little room, he produced cigars and a decanter, with glasses, all of which he placed upon the little round table in the center of the room.

This he rolled along nearer the grate, then he took down his huge meerschaum from where it rested upon the mantel, filling its capacious bowl from a pouch which he produced, placidly saying:

"Is it too much to ask, my good friend, that you listen to a little story which I have to tell?"

"About that—taut thumb, is it?" hesitatingly asked his client.

"About that thumb, and how it came into my possession, yes," confirmed the Go-lightly Detective. "When I have told you all, then you will know why I am so persistent in believing so many peculiar coincidences must mean something graver than mere chance work."

"All right, pardner," and McRustie hitched his chair a bit nearer the table, selecting a cigar, then filling a glass for himself. "Since we've got so deep into the tangle, I reckon we'd better see it through. But, mind you, I'm sticking up for my end: you're barking on the wrong trail, and I just know it in the heart of me!"

"It may be so, but if so, surely it is best to make that discovery before taking more open steps?" gravely observed the detective, lighting his pipe and settling himself as though for a long talk.

"My ticket, to a dot," declared his client. "All ears open, pardner! Reel 'er off, and I'll do the listening."

"I mentioned one Lord Lechmere," began the detective, speaking rapidly, yet so that no word would be misunderstood. "He was a baron of England, and he was the twentieth who bore that title."

"His name was Farquhar Beresford, and he took his title after the main estate belonging to his race."

"Lord Lechmere was something different from the rest of his honored race: they had been noted for their domesticity, while he—well, 'tis ill speaking hard words of the dead, yet the truth must be told!"

"Lord Lechmere, then, was a cold, hard, imperious gentleman in outward seeming, but at heart he was a sad rake! His more youthful exploits were common topics of gossip, and more than one ugly scandal was whispered about his doings, both in his own country and on the Continent."

"Never mind the details: I merely mention

these rumors as a possible explanation for the crime which I have undertaken to treat of."

"For one thing, Lord Lechmere was an ardent sportsman, in almost every sense of that term. He owned an extensive racing stud, for one thing, and his colors were popular both at home and upon the foreign race-courses."

"For another thing, Lord Lechmere owned a costly steam yacht, which ran away with many a thousand pounds of his fortune, and in which he used to wander over half the civilized world. And—this was before his marriage, you observe—he was never without a select party of congenial spirits, male and female: you can imagine the rest!"

"Interesting enough, no doubt, to one who knew his lordship, but what has all this got to do with me? Or the Madame?" asked McRustie, his tones lowering a bit before pronouncing that last title.

"Much or little, as time may prove," equably replied the detective, veiling his face with a blue cloud. "At least, 'twill serve to explain how Lord Lechmere managed to spend all of his enormous income, and even intrench upon his capital, if rumor was not in error."

"From the brief outline I've given, my good friend, you can form a tolerably correct idea of what this noble lord was, in his more youthful days. Both yacht and racing stud cost a fortune each year, for while winning pretty often, Lord Lechmere was a bold bettor, and did not stop at backing his own horses."

"Still, no one could point out an actual crime which he had committed, so far as his own class was concerned. If wild, he was what is commonly known as a gentleman."

"As he grew older Lord Lechmere began to grow steadier, and to sober down considerably."

"Again rumor came to the front, and ere long 'twas whispered about that the gay sportsman had flown into a silken net: in other words, he had fallen in love, and was about to lead his lady-love to the altar."

Once more Austin McRustie permitted his growing impatience to get the upper hand of his politeness.

"Can't you boil it down, pardner? Time's creeping on, and I've got plenty of work ahead, even if you haven't. So—condense, please!"

"Excuse me, my good friend," blandly observed Lucksinger, with an extremely polite bow by way of emphasis. "Did I fidget while you were relating your little history, a bit ago?"

"No, but—"

"That was of personal interest, you would say! Very well, my dear friend: so is this little recital of mine, if you can muster your patience until I reach the kernel of the nut."

"All right, my hearty! Heave ahead, and take your time about it, then! Luckily there's another day a-coming, though!"

German Gus laughed softly, in no wise offended by these words. He was not a man to be driven off the line he had marked out for himself, and calmly resumed his story of a crime:

"For once Dame Rumor was in the right. Lord Lechmere was married, and to a pure a woman as ever drew the breath of life. So my father often told me, and he ought to know: she was a far-away relative of his, on the maternal side."

"After his marriage, Lord Lechmere settled down for a more quiet life, although he still maintained his racing stud and his steam yacht. But the first was run more for excitement than for gain, and the latter was kept free from his former gay associates, and whenever he took a trip abroad, his fair lady was companion enough."

"Until a child was born unto them, that is: a daughter, who was fated to fare sadly in her early years, too!"

"The same you spoke of as being stolen, eh?"

"Yes. They had but the one child, and the birth of that came very near costing them the mother's life. For a year or two the life of Lady Lechmere was almost despaired of, but tender care and frequent change of scene eventually wrought her cure."

"During that critical period, no man could have shown greater love or more anxious solicitude than was displayed by her husband. And, it may be, that the future of both might have been happier had his wife remained an invalid, though that seems unfeeling, when put into plain words."

"For what I am telling, and what I am about to say, I was indebted to my father, you must understand. At that time I was but a lad, busy at school, in far-off Germany. It was my birthplace, and there we lived, as a family, for my father was a German, born and bred, even if he did win a wife from an old English family."

"Well, after Lady Lechmere regained her health, she grew passionately devoted to society, while her husband was just the reverse: he had sown a full crop of wild oats, and as he grew older, he changed in many respects: one was a strong-rooted dislike to society such as his wife found her choicest pleasures in."

"Don't make any mistake, please, my good friend," gravely added the detective, noting a half-sneer upon the face of his client. "A purer-hearted woman or wife never drew the breath of life. Lady Lechmere was gay, be-

cause that was her nature, her training; but she had a heart and love for but one man alone—and that man was her husband."

"She offered to resign her pleasures, for his sake, but he would not hear to that. Instead, he urged her to go out, and thus they each were content to live the life which suited them best."

"As their child grew older, she grew still dearer to both father and mother, but, naturally, considering their mode of life, she saw much more of her father than of his wife."

"So it was that, on the night of the tragedy which I'm leading up to, Lord Lechmere was alone at home, save for his child, and the servants."

"Lady Lechmere had accepted an invitation to spend several days at the house of an intimate friend, and it was during her absence that the heavy blow fell."

"Right here something curious happened, which I've heard many a time from the lips of my father, and he had it direct from the lips of Lady Lechmere herself."

"That night there was a reception given by the friend with whom she was visiting, nearly twenty miles away from the barony where her husband and child were staying."

"Lady Lechmere seemed in the best of health, as she certainly was in spirits, when, all at once, she flung up her arms, with a choking cry of terror and distress, falling to the floor in a swoon."

"All was consternation, as a matter of course, but every effort was turned toward reviving the unfortunate lady. In time these efforts prevailed, and then, in terrified tones, Lady Lechmere asked for her child, her husband. She declared that they were being murdered!"

"All efforts to soothe the lady were in vain, and she insisted on being taken home without an instant's unnecessary delay. And so intense was her distress, that horses were hastily harnessed, and her best friends bore her company on that long night drive."

"The house at Lechmere was dark when they arrived, toward morning, and her friends tried to laugh Lady Lechmere out of her mad fancies; but now, as before, they could not prevail."

"She hardly stopped for the team to be drawn up in front of the Hall, before she sprang forth, rushing into the house and directly to the room which she declared had been shown to her in that vision—the same apartment in which her husband was accustomed to spend his evenings in company with his idolized daughter."

"Before another person could reach the threshold, a wild, despairing shriek came back to their ears, and rushing forward, they beheld—husband and wife lying upon a blood-stained floor, his person bleeding from half a score wounds, her dress dabbled in his gore! One senseless, the other seemingly a corpse!"

"Was he dead, in fact, though?" asked McRustie.

"Not dead, but terribly wounded and unable to talk. And this severed thumb was the sole clew to the assassin!"

CHAPTER XV.

LIPS LOCIED THROUGH LIFE.

WHILE speaking, German Gus once more produced that grim relic, and held it forth as though to lend emphasis to his words.

"It is the same, though so many years have rolled along since then, my good friend, the very same, yet with a difference, too! Now it looks and feels like a thing of imperishable death, but then—one could almost fancy life was yet lingering, and with life the power to speak and proclaim its once ownership!"

Gustave Lucksinger looked almost pensive as he sat looking through a tobacco-vail at the handless thumb, but Austin McRustie held precious little sympathy with metaphysics, amateur or professional, and blurted out:

"That's all bosh, if you are saying it, pardner! Switch off from the pretty talk that really means nothing, and go on with what counts! You say that thumb was a clew, but—just who did it point at?"

German Gus frowned a bit at this rude interruption. Every man has his little weaknesses, and a gentle leaning toward the mystic had strong attractions for Lucksinger.

As a rule, he was all business during business hours, but this night was an exception, surely.

From start to finish the finger of fate seemed visible through all.

How else could his meeting with Austin McRustie be accounted for, without violating all the probabilities? He, the one man in all that vast city, no doubt, who could give a definite clew to the author of that crime committed beyond the Atlantic, now seventeen years since!

They, the two men best fitted to assist each other in the ends held most dear to their hearts! Truly, then, he could hardly be blamed for falling into a mood such as the breezy fellow from the mining-country so rudely interrupted.

Still, Gustave Lucksinger took that interruption all in good part, and nothing save that fleeting frown betrayed his annoyance.

"Stand there, little telltale!" he said, softly, placing the bottle of alcohol, to which he had

again consigned that relic, upon the table where the gaslight passed through the colorless liquid. "For many long years thou hast remained a veritable Sphinx, holding a momentous secret, yet never crooking thy single joint this way nor that—and if the coming of evil caused thy thumb to prick—Oxcoose me, mein teur friendt!" bobbing his blonde head hastily toward his client, from whose lips came a snort of impatient disgust.

"Because, if you're bound to go much further that way, pardner, I'll just take the liberty of closing my peepers for a snooze!" declared the mine-owner, bluntly.

"Und i vhas making a vool py myselluf, eh? Vell, vell, vell! Foonny how dose d'ings vill habben vhen—Whoa, Shanyuar!" arresting himself with stern emphasis. "Dot broofs it some more, py cracious! I vhas schust galloping off like a Shon-donkey vonce again!"

Austin McRustie lost his ill-humor as he watched this guileless struggle against a besetting sin. Gustave Lucksinger seemed so thoroughly in earnest that he could not refuse him full credit.

"Don't snap a jaw with putting the cure on too harsh, pardner," he observed, kindly. "I wouldn't be kicking at all, if the night was a bit younger. But—well, if you only could manage to stick to the track until the wire was reached, it'd suit me can down to the ground!"

"At least I can make the attempt, my good friend," said Lucksinger, with a good-natured smile. "I thank you for calling me to order, and now—clear the track, eh?"

"All's clear, pardner, and you've only got to keep your stride to come in a winner," rejoined his client.

German Gus closed his lids for a few seconds, like one who is trying to remember just where he had broken off, then he picked up the thread of his story, speaking rapidly, as follows:

"Of course assistance was offered without delay by the friends of the unfortunate couple, and servants were hastily sent away in quest of surgical assistance.

"Long before this could reach the Hall, however, the worst was nearly as good as guessed.

"Lord Lechmere was terribly wounded, his body bearing full half a score cuts and stabs, several of which appeared deep enough to prove surely fatal in themselves, without the great loss of blood which had taken place during all those hours of helplessness on his part.

"But even this was not all, nor yet the worst, from a certain point of view. Little Berenice was gone, nor could she be found in or around the Hall!

"While waiting for the medical men to arrive, questions were poured upon the servants, but with little avail. Not one of them could cast so much as a single ray of light upon the case.

"Lord Lechmere had himself bidden them retire as usual, when their regular duties were completed. He told the governess that she need give no further thought to her young charge that night, since Berenice had won her most prized treat: 'a whole night with papa!'

"As a matter of course the servants obeyed, and up to the instant when the frantic scream of their beautiful mistress roused them from their slumbers, not one among them all had so much as dreamed of brewing trouble.

"If there had been any outcry, and sounds attending the fearful struggle which Lord Lechmere had surely made—his numerous wounds, and the disordered state of the room in which that crime was committed was proof enough of this—they had failed to rouse any one of the servants.

"You begin to frown, my good friend? You are charging me in your mind with too long dwelling upon trifling details?"

"Well, if my face tells you all that, pardner, wouldn't it be mighty impolite in me to say it told lies?"

"Not lies, my friend, but making a very natural mistake," good-naturedly retorted the detective, smiling in his turn. "I am not wasting words, for what I might omit now, would have to be supplied later, else you could hardly understand why so many long years have gone by without the mystery of that midnight crime being fairly solved."

"Oh, if that's the way of it, I'm on my knees to you, pardner! Call it even, and go ahead once more."

"Very well, my friend, I will go ahead, as you say. And the next thing is about the discovery of this, my little Sphinx," with another nod toward the bottled thumb.

"It was not found until after the doctors had been working for some little time over the unconscious baron, then it was taken from his tightly-clinched right hand, where it had remained unsuspected by any of Lord Lechmere's friends for so long.

"Even then very few words were spoken in relation to the possible clew to the author of that double crime. For one thing, only the medical men were present, and their patient required all their care. For another, it was hoped that his lordship would speedily be able to tell his own story.

"Very possibly that last reason was the

strongest, for the reputation won by his lordship for being as fierce as he was fearless, if occasion required, was surely known by the doctors. And—he who was first to discover that severed thumb, unhesitatingly pronounced it to have come from a woman's hand!"

Austin McRustie frowned afresh at this impressive statement. He knew that it was coming, but that fact did not give him sufficient nerve to let those words pass by without comment.

"Talk's easy, pardner, but that's wild—awfully wild!"

"You mean something, my good friend?"

"I mean that that's all poppycock! A thumb's a thumb, and when it's been parted from the hand that used to own it, who's to say whether it belonged to a man or a woman?"

"There is the shape, the general appearance, which is a guide."

"Guide to nothing! How are you going to prove that it belonged to a womanish man, or to a masculine woman, eh? Tell me that, will you?"

"You are asking a hard question, my friend, but—"

"It's a question that those doctors of yours ought to have found an answer for, before they made that declaration, pardner. If you can't answer it now, how could they answer it then?"

Austin McRustie looked like one who feels he has scored an important point, but German Gus smiled placidly as he made reply:

"Does it matter so much who supplied the answer, my friend, just so a positive answer be given? Then—patience yet a little longer, I ask of you, dear sir!"

"All right, only—well, pitch your jenny, then!"

"This thumb, as a possibly important clew, was placed in alcohol for safe preservation, by the doctor who first made that discovery. For Lord Lechmere did not recover his senses sufficiently to be questioned or to talk, until three full weeks had crawled by.

"During all that time nothing could be learned, though every effort was made. The Lady Berenice was gone, leaving only that ghastly clew behind her.

"There was no trace of strangers having been near Lechmere Hall. No one had been seen going or coming, save those who had a right to be upon the premises. And to not one of those few could suspicion possibly cling.

"This heavy double shock completely broke the baroness down, but she refused to rest or take comfort while the life of her husband hung in the balance. But then when his senses returned, and he could understand what was said to him, Lady Lechmere broke down in fact.

"For, in answer to her piteous questions concerning himself, his assault, and their little child, she could win no answer! Lord Lechmere locked his lips tightly, and never a word of explanation would he give even to the wife whom he loved so dearly!"

"Ashamed, I reckon. And that makes me more'n ever certain you're 'way off when you try to mix the Madame up in this nasty affair!"

"Wait, my good friend; I have not reached the end, as yet," coolly retorted the detective, nothing moved by that almost fierce argument.

"That was but the beginning of a silence which lasted for years. Not even when his wife lay upon her death-bed would Lord Lechmere unlock his lips. He had nothing to say. He was doing all that money and human skill could do to recover their lost child, but—beyond that, he had nothing to say!"

"It was so from the very first, and it was so to the very last. The severed thumb was shown him by the physician who had preserved it, but he made no sign of recognition, had no word of explanation to offer. He took possession of the severed thumb, and only one other man saw it again up to the day of Lord Lechmere's death!"

"That man was yourself, of course?"

"Not so, my friend. I was but a lad, then, as I told you before. But I will explain more clearly, later on. Just now—listen, please!"

"Lord Lechmere was a man of wonderfully strong constitution, yet he had been so terribly injured that it was more than a year before he could be called anything better than an invalid. And ere that year expired, Lady Lechmere had found her grave!

"I believe, now, it was purely through grieving for her lost child that her ladyship pined away, although the doctors gave her disease another name. Grieving thus, and because her lord was so grimly silent. Not even when he was summoned to her death-bed, would Lord Lechmere unlock the lips he had sealed with a silent oath!"

"After this, Lord Lechmere broke up his racing stud, dropped all other interests, and gave himself up to one end in life: hunting for the criminal who had ruined his home and happiness.

"In this search he spent time and money unceasingly, but it was all in vain. He never found his enemy. He never picked up the slightest clew, after that severed thumb was placed in his hand."

"But something seeme' to warn him that the end was drawing near, and acting upon

that premonition of impending evil, his lordship sought out and gave to a close friend of his youth, a sealed packet, on the cover of which was penned an injunction not to open or break seal unless death should suddenly overtake the writer.

"Together with this package Lord Lechmere transferred this bottle, just as you hold it now, my friend," added German Gus, one hand toying with the glass receptacle wherein rested the severed thumb. "He was strong and hearty then, but before a half-year more had rolled by, his lordship was found dead, stabbed through the heart, from behind!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SEAL BROKEN BY DEATH.

AUSTIN MCROSTIE shifted his position with a nervous start. He had waited impatiently for German Gus to reach this point, but now that he felt assured the climax was near to hand, he dreaded to learn all.

He knew that the ending would almost surely be a direct accusation against the woman whom he had once lived with so happily, but even yet he refused to believe in her guilt.

Only for the space of a single breath did that shrinking last, and then rallying his courage, he almost gruffly spoke out:

"Go on, pardner! I've listened so long, I'll hear the rest. Only—come to an ending as quick as you can manage, please."

"Very well, my good friend," gravely answered the detective. "You have my warm thanks for bearing with me so long. I would have been briefer, but if so, we might have lost even more time, through having to turn back for neglected threads. Now, listen, then!"

"That death took place a little more than two years ago, and the assassin has not yet been brought to the bar of justice. Just as in the other case of which I've been telling you, no one saw or heard the murderer, unless it might have been his lordship.

"Even that is doubtful, though. He gave no token of having made a fight for his life. There was but one wound, leading straight to his heart, entering through the back, as though the assassin had stolen silently up from the rear and taken time to plant the steel where there could be no possible failure.

"'Twas a strong, steady, sure hand that dealt that blow, my friend! No man could have done the deed more surely. And yet—I firmly believe that hand belonged to a woman, from whose left hand a living thumb had once been severed!"

As these words left his lips, German Gus once more touched that glass receptacle, as though to lend his speech a keener point.

Austin McRustie could not affect to misunderstand his full meaning, but he said nothing in words. His sternly corrugated brows gave sufficient denial, however.

"As I said," resumed Lucksinger, "that murder occurred a little over two years ago, and with the death of Lord Lechmere, his ancient race became extinct, unless the stolen child yet lives. If so, she is heiress to an enormous fortune, and to the title. Failing male heirs, that descends to the female line.

"As soon as the death of Lord Lechmere was reported and proven, the friend to whom he had intrusted those two packages immediately opened them, hoping through their means to obtain a clew to the assassin.

"One parcel contained this bottle, with its contents, just as you see them now. The other contained two sheets of paper, one of which was a note signed by Lord Lechmere, and directed to the man whom he had intrusted with his secret.

"In that note, Lord Lechmere stated that, failing his own doubtful success, he bequeathed a sacred legacy of vengeance to the friend of his youth, his manhood, his ruined days.

"He stated that already two separate attempts had been made against his life, both of which, he firmly believed, made by the hired tools of the being who had lost that thumb while attempting his death.

"Although he had no means of proving his words, he solemnly declared that, in case of his sudden death, of which he had been forewarned, his slayer would be found when the hand from which that thumb had been severed was discovered."

"All of which might do to fill out a blood-and-thunder play, pardner, but to my mind it's nothing of more importance than a nightmare dream. Fat pork and hot biscuit could batch up just such another crazy batch of nonsense!" rudely broke in the mine-owner.

"That is one point of view, my friend," coolly retorted Lucksinger, with another of his bland smiles, showing no signs of irritation at the interruption. "If there was no other, it might possibly hold good."

"What other is there, then?" sullenly demanded his unruly client. "If you hold one such, isn't it about time to lug it forth? You've been chawing wind long enough, Heaven knows!"

"Wait, and patience, Mr. McRustie. You have agreed to hear my story of a crime, and you surely are not a man to go back on your word?"

"No, but—well, spin it out, pardner!" and the mine-owner sunk back in his chair with an exaggerated sigh of forced resignation.

Gustave Lucksinger laughed softly, his blue eyes twinkling with a degree of amusement. Possibly he was just human enough to enjoy protracting the agony, for he surely must have seen how uneasy at heart his client had been growing through all this.

"Am I so tiresome, then, my good friend?" he innocently inquired, that smile giving place to an expression of embarrassment. "Ach! it is so hard!—this language of yours! It is so different from that of my nativity! If you—may I speak in German, then, yes?"

"Well, maybe I'd learn just as much, even if I couldn't make head or tail out of a single word of your lingo!"

German Gus chuckled softly at this malicious hit, but his stock of good nature seemed inexhaustible, and he simply said:

"It is not familiar, then, the German? Well, since that is I must do the best I can, is it not right?"

"On, go on, man! Day is almost here, and we're never a whit further on than when you began chattering, so far as I can see. You spoke of a second paper; what did that contain?"

"The secret which Lord Lechmere had kept locked within his own heart and brain for so many long years," was the grave reply. "In that paper was briefly but clearly set down the real facts of that mysterious crime at Lechmere Hall, fifteen years before the date at which the words first met the wondering eyes of my father."

"Your father?" ejaculated Austin McRustie, showing his surprise without the slightest disguise. "What had your father to do with it, pardner?"

"He was the friend of whom I spoke, my good sir," calmly answered the detective. "Does it seem so strange to your ears, then?"

"No, but—I thought—" "My father was called Graf von Lucksinger; that is, Count Lucksinger, Mr. McRustie. His race was even older than that of Lechmere, although possessing fewer acres and many fewer guineas."

One more thoroughly American never drew breath of life than was Austin McRustie, but he unconsciously "loved a lord," and could not help betraying something of that feeling just then.

Almost unconsciously his voice and manner took on a higher degree of respect, as he spoke again, apologetically:

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I really didn't mean—"

"Never mention it, my good friend," and with another of his good-humored smiles, the Go-lightly Detective reached forth a hand to clasp that which his client willingly surrendered. "How should you know? And I—what have I to do with titles, and such Old-World prejudices?"

"Bless you, man, dear, I haven't any prejudice against 'em!" heartily declared his client, returning that grip with interest. "So long as he plays white and deals on the square, I reckon a lord is just as good as any other fellow, out here!"

"At least I will try to deserve that belief," meekly said Lucksinger, only his lowering lashes hiding that amused twinkling in his eyes.

"Of course you will, pardner. And now—about that paper, then?"

Thus brought back to the point he had involuntarily strayed away from, the detective resumed his narrative:

"About that second paper, then, my good friend. It was a statement written out by Lord Lechmere, and was intended to guard against the possibility of his meeting death before he should discover his stolen child and heiress."

"But, first, allow me to finish what I started to tell about that confidential note of explanation, addressed to my father."

"After explaining his reasons for thinking that secret enemies were determined to cut his life short, Lord Lechmere spoke of the paper with which his note was sent."

"This was the second one he had written, for the first had been stolen from his private desk, several years before he wrote that note. He had no positive means of knowing just how its existence had been discovered, or in what manner the theft had been contrived; but he did suspect most strongly the hand that did the thieving."

"This was a groom who had until recently been in his employ, but whom he had discharged shortly before that abduction, for brutality with the horses."

Austin McRustie gave a start, his face lighting up eagerly as he heard these words.

"There you have it, pardner! Right there you have the key to the whole business, man! That fellow turned both-tricks, and I just know it! He stole the kid, and cut the daddy, for revenge!"

"You forget that the severed thumb belonged to a woman, sir?"

"What sure proof is there of that, I'd like to know? Only the guess of a crack-brained medicine sharp, at best! No, sir! I've said it,

and I'll stick to it: find that groom, and you've got the rat out of the meal-chest!"

"That groom was found, and his innocence clearly proven to Lord Lechmere's satisfaction, so far as the abduction was concerned," the detective quietly asserted. "He was miles from Lechmere that night, and in company whose united evidence could not be disputed."

The mine-owner was silenced, if not wholly convinced. He was fighting against the blow which he more than ever felt was suspended above the head of the woman he had once called wife.

"All this Lord Lechmere explained in his letter to my father," resumed the detective. "He never suspected that Jem Cross had taken part in that assault and kidnapping, however, because his own eyes had told him better at the time; but he did investigate his record after missing the statement he had written out."

"Now then, I can come to that repeated statement of the crime at Lechmere Hall, having cleared up all other points. Listen, my good friend, and you will understand why I have taken so many pains to make you see each step perfectly clear as we passed along."

"According to that statement, Lord Lechmere was with his daughter in the apartment where, at an early hour of the morning, his bleeding body was found by his wife."

"Save they, all others belonging to Lechmere Hall had retired, but this was by no means an unusual proceeding. When the little baroness had been particularly good all day, this was her richest treat: to 'sit up with papa' until sleep overcame her."

"Continuing, that statement declared that the criminal gained an entrance unsuspected, coming upon them by surprise, knife in hand. The first warning Lord Lechmere had of impending peril was when his child cried out in affright, and her gaze of alarm caused him to turn quickly around, almost surely preserving his life by that movement."

"A long, keen blade was shooting down toward his heart, just as another knife sought and found his life years later!"

"He was badly wounded, but sprung up to a struggle for life with an antagonist such as no man could afford to despise, woman though it was!"

"He wrote that? A woman, he said?" huskily demanded McRustie.

"He wrote that, and in signing his name to the statement, added a solemn oath to the perfect truth of each word as he had set it down," gravely replied the detective.

"Go on. Beg pardon for chipping, but I couldn't— Go on, man!"

The mine-owner was strongly agitated, though he strove desperately to conceal his emotions. His pale, sweat-bedewed face told how much he was suffering, however.

"There is no particular need to say more about that bitter fight of an unarmed man against an armed fury, for his life," resumed Lucksinger, gravely. "In fact, Lord Lechmere touched but lightly upon that point. No doubt he felt that his many scars would speak for it all!"

"But he did write in detail as to his assailant, and the abductor of his child, although he failed to set down any cause for such savage hatred."

"He declared it was a woman, once an opera-singer, named Giulia Raimando; black hair and eyes, rich, dark complexion, and a figure which was queenly in its perfect proportions. Then he added: upon her right breast would be found a small, triangular scar, where an incipient cancer had been burned out with lunar caustic, several years before!"

"My wife, by Tophet!" almost screamed Austin McRustie, leaping to his feet.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIGHTING AGAINST CONVICTION.

THIS was an almost involuntary exclamation on the part of the mine-owner, since it certainly would never have been given had he not been so completely taken by surprise.

Against any direct accusation he had armed himself, but this—it came in such an unexpected shape that even his strong nerve-power failed its master for the moment.

Those blue eyes caught a keener gleam, perhaps, but in nothing else did Gustave Lucksinger betray the triumph which, as a detective, he must surely have felt at finding his belief so strongly confirmed.

Instead, his face looked gravely sympathetic, and there was a touch of something akin to regret as he spoke again:

"I am sorry if the blow falls heavily, Mr. McRustie, but surely it is better to know the very worst, rather than to live on half-truths. And this woman—"

"It's just another one of those blessed coincidences you've been prating about, pardner," broke in the other, with a forced laugh. "Pity not to keep up the tune—ne starts the parade with, isn't it? And so—what comes next?"

"Another coincidence? Yes, my good friend since you speak of that! First, a woman who

has stolen away an only child from its father. A woman who has lost a thumb from her left hand. That woman an actress upon the stage, and who—"

"But yours was an opera-singer, you claim, while the Madame couldn't sing for sour apples!" broke in McRustie, with forced triumph in his tones. "That lets us out, I reckon, pardner!"

"Because the Madame declared her inability to sing a note," quily retorted the detective. "If the good and pure and innocent lady her deserted husband still firmly believes her, that declaration might be implicitly relied upon but—was she all this?"

"Touch lightly, pardner!"

"I honor you for the faith you show in one who has wronged you so bitterly, sir, but still I must go by the record. And that—Had your wife such a scar as Lord Lechmere mentioned, Mr. McRustie?"

Those black eyes drooped, and their owner gave a nervous start at this pointed question. It was one which had betrayed him only a few moments before, and he could not decide to meet the point with an actual lie.

Gustave Lucksinger had already learned all he required to know on that score, but it was a rule with him to make every step certain as he went along, leaving nothing to chance which could possibly be put on open record.

"Lord Lechmere was very definite on this point, my friend, and even gave a pen-drawing of that scar, as to size and shape. He said it was one which no disguise could cover, no artifice, and nothing less than the knife could remove. And that would leave a still plainer scar on the spot he described."

"He swore that Giulia Raimando, the woman who stabbed him and stole his child, bore such a scar upon her right breast. Now—if you can assure me, on honor, that the Madame had no such scar, then I'll not only beg your humble pardon for wronging her in my mind, but will make any amends in addition which you may think appropriate."

This was a plain offer, but German Gus made it so on purpose. He spoke slowly, using more words than were strictly necessary, for pretty much the same reason: to give Austin McRustie more time in which to make his final decision.

But that response was slow in coming. McRustie frowned more darkly than ever, his eyes downcast, his strong jaws grinding the cigar to a moist pulp.

Although plainly cornered, he was not yet willing to yield. Vainly though he must have known it was, he was still fighting against open conviction against his will.

So far from feeling anger or annoyance at this obstinacy, German Gus liked his new client all the better for his grim loyalty to one whom he had loved in days gone by, bitterly though she might have wronged him since.

"It is not a particularly agreeable task, this one, my good friend," Gustave Lucksinger added, gently touching an arm with his strong, white hand. "It would be much easier for me to say, 'What matter? Let the dead past bury its dead!' But—would that be fair, even to the living?"

"You know otherwise, Mr. McRustie. If my strong suspicions against the woman you call the Madame are wrong, it is her dues that she be completely cleared from all doubt, all suspicion."

"If right, as I firmly believe, for the sake of your young daughter she ought to be fully exposed, even though so doing makes it necessary that she should pay the full penalty due other crimes than those which she has committed against you and yours."

Through this grave speech, Austin McRustie was fighting his battle as only a strong nature can fight. He knew that everything was pointing against his wishes, yet he could not bear to think of the Madame as so much deeper dyed with sin than he had so far thought.

But now, as Gustave Lucksinger paused, the mine-owner forced himself to speak.

"You're right, pardner, and I'd be a bigger fool than ever if I even tried to deny that much. I know that the Madame is a born devil, for I've seen her—"

Austin McRustie broke off, springing to his feet, flinging out his arms and displaying his large person, speaking harshly:

"Look me over, pardner! Take me in, as far as you can. Are you doing that much, Luck-singer?"

"I see me a man—sure!" gravely declared the detective, glancing admiringly over that stalwart figure. "I likes me bedder off you go my side in, as I hef me fight against you, any-way!"

"Then I'm not a puling baby! I'm not a slobbering idiot!"

"Nein, two dimes oaf'er!" Austin McRustie dropped back into his chair, drawing a long breath as of strong relief. Something like a faint smile flitted across his face as he saw how narrowly the detective was watching him.

It was a poor consolation, yet better than nothing. Up to that minute it had been Luck-singer who offered the riddles for guessing.

But he hardly felt in the proper mood for improving that opening, and closely following that long-drawn breath came the words:

"Well, I'd hate to think that way my own self, but blessed if I can see just how I can help it, pardner! Even now, knowing her as I surely ought by this time, if I was left alone with the Madame for an hour, she could make me swear black was snow-white and bend me to her sweet will, as tall grass bends before a gale!"

The Go-lightly Detective was watching that strongly moved face very closely the while. He saw that Austin McRustie was terribly in earnest, even though he strove to partially disguise this by his choice of words.

It was a curious study, and at another time Lucksinger might have enjoyed studying it more closely. But now—time was passing, and the new day which was dawning had its important work cut out for them both.

"Surely not now, since you are beginning to fairly know her, Mr. McRustie?" he ejaculated, in grave surprise.

"Yes, and you'd go just the same fashion if she had a fair whack at you, pardner!" moodily declared the mine-owner.

A swift smile flashed into German Gus's face at this, and his reply came on the instant:

"I hope I'll find myself near enough for those powers of fascination to be exerted, my friend, for then I'll know the game is as good as won!"

Austin McRustie shook his head frowningly.

"You'll slip up on it I tell you, man! You are a man, I reckon?"

"I believe so, yes."

"That settles it, then! No man who ever drew breath can stand up against such arts as the Madame can fetch into play when she takes a notion! I couldn't—you can't—no other man can, I repeat!"

There was a brief silence, then the detective gravely uttered:

"One man did withstand her arts: Lord Lechmere!"

"And died! But that's too much: that's going a bit too far, pardner," McRustie swiftly amended. "Wicked though the Madame may be, she never went that far! I'd sooner think my hand stabbed your lord through the back, than that she did it!"

"Guilia Raimando dealt that death-blow, either with her own hand, or by the hand of a hired tool," seriously declared the detective. "I have given you my reasons for believing that Giulia Raimando is none other than the actress whom you first met under the name of Josephine Tudor, and whom you now term the Madame."

"Is it at all likely that there should be two women so strangely marked? Two women, both of them with a maimed left hand! Each one of them with peculiarly shaped finger-nails? Each one with a similar scar located in the same region?"

Austin McRustie shifted uneasily in his chair during this rapid summing-up, but he looked far from satisfied, and even now he was trying hard to fight away the ugly truth.

"I've met more'n one odd puzzle in my time, pardner, and left it, none the less a puzzle for all my trying. This may be another one of much the same sort, but whether it is or not, I'm sticking to just this much: I'll never believe the Madame is your Italian opera-singer until I've had it straight from her own lips—so there!"

"You shall learn the whole truth, Mr. McRustie, and direct from her lips," came the swift assurance. "That murder must be avenged, and the first decisive step in that direction, I'm going to ferret out this woman whom you have asked my help to unearth."

"I didn't—if I'd even thought—"

"Don't speak without due reflection, my good friend," quickly interrupted the detective. "You surely are willing for justice to take its course? You would not assist a criminal to escape the punishment justly his or her due?"

"But—murder!" huskily muttered McRustie, his head drooping, his fingers nervously twitching. "Not that, man! I can't make it come true! Just think of it, once!"

"I loved her; she was like a star from Heaven fallen; into the lap of a child who cries for it! I loved her, and she—she may not have cared for me, as I did for her, but she was the same as a mother to my little girl!"

Gustave Lucksinger listened gravely enough, but as his client came to an end, he spoke in cold, pitiless tones, losing the man in the officer of the law.

"All this may be true enough, Mr. McRustie, and I can feel both sympathy and pity for you in this distress; but beyond that point I can't go, with my duty in opposition, as it surely is."

"A legacy of vengeance was handed my father, by Lord Lechmere. My father worked without ceasing to unearth that criminal, and his too early death was almost surely due to those very exertions."

"While on his death-bed he told me all, giving me both clews to the thumbless hand, swearing me to take up his work where failing nature forced him to break off."

"Look that oath, and I shall keep my vow unless death overtakes me before I can reach the end of my trail of vengeance. Nothing that

you may say or do can bar my way to that goal."

"If the woman who stole the little baroness is the same woman who ran away with your daughter, you can neither hinder me nor save her, unless she has already taken to flight again. And even that will only delay, not prevent justice from overtaking her."

Austin McRustie lifted his head as the detective ceased speaking, and a change had come into his strong face.

"It's not justice that I'm going to fight against, pardner," he said, soberly, meeting those blue eyes without flinching. "It came on me mighty hard, evil though I knew the Madame surely was, and I just had to fight it out with myself. But now—it's simple justice you're after, pardner?"

"Simple justice, my good friend."

"Then I'll lend you what help I can, but I'm sticking to my old point: I don't believe my woman is your woman, so there!"

"Let it remain so, then. The first thing is to find the Madame!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

TAKING THE FIRST STEP.

So much time had been consumed before this understanding was reached, that the night had passed and day had dawned.

Rising to his feet, German Gus stretched his strong young arms with a lusty yawn, then turned off the gas.

This cast the room into shadow, and the Go-lightly Detective gave a little laugh as he crossed over to draw the shade before his one window.

"See! It is sunshine outside, my good friend!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up with a bright smile which drove away all lines produced by fatigue or loss of sleep. "How is it with you, Mr. McRustie? For my part, my stomach is beginning to grow clamorous!"

"Well, I've seen the time when I felt hungrier, but I reckon it's creeping along toward feeding-time," admitted the mine-owner. "Do you grub here, or outside?"

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other, just as it happens," lightly returned the detective, returning to the table and setting things more in order.

He replaced the ivory casket upon the mantelpiece, securely locked and concealing its grim clew to past crimes. He emptied his pipe, and restored it to its customary position when not in use. He pushed back the table, removing the liquor and cigars, then glanced around his apartment with a quaint little nod of approval.

"I vhas no slouch when it gomes py house-geeing, nein?" he asked, now the gay, boyish, careless fellow on whom had been bestowed that sobriquet: the "Go-lightly Detective."

Austin McRustie nodded assent, but the light of day showed deeper lines written upon his face than had been there when that long interview began, and noting this much, Gustave Lucksinger changed his manner in some degree.

"Come, my friend, we both need freshening up a bit, and I can think of nothing better for that than a brisk little walk in the morning air, to end with a hot breakfast and a glass of good Rhine wine. And then we will both be better fitted for taking our first step in this game which we have agreed to play through to the end."

"What step is that, pardner?" asked McRustie, his eyes catching a renewed glow the while.

But Gustave Lucksinger was not ready to enter into details, just then, and so made a laughing reply.

"Pleasure first, my good friend! Surely we have had talking enough for one heat? Yes? Good, many times over! Then—away to food and drink! 'Tis by those I live, my friend!"

"Well, I've heard of others who had pretty much the same complaint, pardner," chucklingly observed McRustie, catching part of that light airiness despite his own sore heart and troubled brain. "Pleasure goes, and just the mention of it begins to make one part of my corporation holler for grub—and plenty of it, too!"

This was just the mood German Gus was trying to arouse, and keeping up a merry, careless chatter, he led his client from the house, into the street, then briskly along through the crisp morning air to the restaurant where he usually took his meals when humor or convenience decided him against having them sent up to his chambers.

Austin McRustie was naturally one fond of good cheer, and though recent happenings and revelations were hardly calculated to improve his appetite, it was not long before the food and good liquor began to exert its cheerful influence, pretty much as German Gus had calculated.

Although they were seated at a private table, with no one else near enough to catch such words as they might utter, by mutual consent the two men avoided all allusion to the business they had in hand. Just then they were well content to take a rest on that score.

Gustave Lucksinger exerted himself rarely, and by his bright, witty, yet pleasant chat, gradually removed such aversion as he had in-

spired McRustie with through his pitiless conclusions.

They took their time at table, and on leaving it, paused to light each a cigar at the bar kept in an adjoining apartment, then left the place, locking arms as their feet struck the pavement.

Not until then did McRustie ask a question which bore upon their recent consultation.

"Is this the step you hinted at taking, pardner?"

"Yes," admitted the detective. "You will take it with me, of course?"

"I'm enlisted for the war," curtly retorted his client. "Is it against the regulations to ask where we're going, though?"

"Not at all, my friend. I'm going to take a look at the thug who caught the steel intended for your heart."

"Of course it's something more than mere curiosity that takes you to him?" ventured McRustie, after a brief silence.

"Certainly! He ought to know whose good money it was hired him to down a man like you, and if he has that knowledge—well, when he is convinced that one of his pals gave him that hurt, I reckon he'll be willing enough to peach!"

"I hope he will do just that!" almost viciously ejaculated the mine-owner. "Not that I'm so hot against any of the gang, but—it'll show you made one mistake, if the fellow can tell the truth!"

"In regard to the Madame, you mean?" quietly asked the detective.

"Just that! And I'm getting in a hurry to see you eat your words, too, my fine fellow!" with a short, grim chuckle.

"If such an apology is due, be sure I will pay it, my friend," came the genial response. "And—if I am right, yes?"

"Then I'll—think about it!"

German Gus laughed softly at this characteristic answer. It was nothing more than he was prepared for. This employer of his was something out of the ordinary rut, and he was beginning to like him all the better for that same oddity.

It did not take very long for two such brisk pedestrians to reach their destination, and from there they were sent to a hospital. The fellow had been seriously injured, hence the change made.

Half an hour later the two men were standing near the cot upon which the wounded rascal was resting, and finding him both awake and conscious, German Gus lost little time in preliminaries.

"My friend, you are in a tolerably bad way, I am assured by the nurse, but you mustn't hold a grudge against either this gentleman or myself. We never harmed you, to speak of."

The wounded man gave a surly growl, then closed his eyes, which had been glowering at his visitors in sullen curiosity. He turned his head to the other side, plainly averse to receiving questions or giving answers.

But the Go-Lightly Detective was not one to be bluffed so readily, and coolly returned to the attack.

"You were hired to kill or disable this gentleman, of course, my good fellow. That is proven plainly enough by what happened at your meeting, last night. Is it not so, then?"

Still a sullen silence.

"You were stabbed by one of your mates. Possibly he intended that favor for my friend, this gentleman, but—you caught it! And, having wounded you so seriously, that pal ran away like a cur, without making the slightest attempt to save you from arrest, or from possible death through his carelessness—if carelessness it was!"

"Are you so certain, then, that it wasn't a put-up job to down you, by a personal enemy, my friend? Surely the knave ought to have known he was cutting a friend—if he really held you as such?"

Nothing but a surly grunt; not a word would the fellow utter.

Then the detective took another course, speaking earnestly:

"If you recover from this injury, my friend, of course you know that it will be a very easy task to send you over the road for a goodly term of years! Now, isn't it worth a few words, to be sure that there will be no prosecution?"

"Oh, give us a rest, curse ye!" growled the ruffian.

"Then you can use your tongue?" with feigned surprise and gratification. "Good, so far! Now—tell me just whose money it was that paid for your risk and trouble, and I'll give you a written pledge that no prosecution shall follow, in your case, besides paying you a snug little sum in hand to tide you over the breakers."

"That is a fair offer, surely? Unless you are worse than a fool, you will accept it, for—"

"Go to the deuce and shake yourself, curse you!" hoarsely growled the ruffian, burying his face still deeper in his pillow. "I don't know you, nor do I know what you're driving at. I was slugged by a gang—and I'll make you suffer for your share in it if I ever get on my feet again!"

With a shrug of his broad shoulders, German

Gus gave it over as a bad job. After such a speech, he knew that he was wasting time which might easily be put to far better advantage.

In company with Austin McRustie, he turned to leave the hospital, but pausing at the outer door, to speak with an officer in plain clothes, who was there on duty.

"Caruthers, you know me, and know that I wouldn't ask such a favor without fair warrant for so doing. Now, will you oblige me by making a note of all persons who call to ask about Frank Mason, or who pays him a call for the purpose of having a private word?"

"I'll do that, sir, with pleasure," came the immediate response. "It is the fellow who got cut last night, isn't it, Lucksinger?"

"Yes. You know him, then?"

"And precious little good I know of him, too! He's a tough case, with but one redeeming quality: he'll die rather than blow on one of his pals."

"Then those same pals ought to respect him enough to show some solicitude as to his condition, and hence will be all the more likely to call on him shortly. Don't you think so?"

"It looks that way, yes," with a grim chuckle, as he turned the corner in company with the two men.

"You are going off duty, then?" asked Lucksinger, with an expression of annoyance. "If so, I'll have to ask help from another until you get back, of course."

"No, I'm just taking a bit of stroll for the sake of being in good company," came the laughing answer. "Then, too, if I stand stock-still in front of the hospital, I might as well be in uniform."

"That's so! Well, when you go back, you'll keep both eyes open to oblige a friend, of course?"

"Surely I will; but there's one pal who'll hardly pay an early visit to Mason's cot, for he got his skull smashed while burgling a house last night, and if Jem Cross— Hallo, pardner!" breaking off abruptly, as German Gus gave a sudden start. "What's the matter now?"

"Ach!" with a subdued howl of agony. "I hit me mein gorn a heel against! Dunder py guns! how dot kicks ub grazzy, like a sore dooth!"

CHAPTER XIX.

GERMAN GUS AWAITS HIS TURN.

WITH a muffled howl of agony, German Gus hopped on one foot while nursing the other with both hands, his visage grotesquely contorted, the whole performance seeming so perfectly natural that not even Austin McRustie suspected the truth.

"Mein Gott! off a veller hef so many gorns like me, pedder he hire all dose valking done, und bimself go ride a puggy in! Look py dot!" and he thrust forth a foot, across the polished top of which could be seen the marks of heel-nails. "I gork myselluf vorser as a horse inderfering his bind lecks togedder—yes!"

German Gus saw that he had perfectly covered his slip, and brought his impromptu comedy to an end. He still limped perceptibly as their walk was renewed, but that was all.

"You vhas saying—ach! I hates me a gorn goundry more as effer! You vhas—was saying something about—what was it, Caruthers?"

"About some fellow getting the worst of a burglary, wasn't it?" suggested McRustie.

"That was it, sir. It brought the case to mind, your speaking about his pals calling on Frank Mason, you know."

"I remember, now, but my corn—never mind! What was it you started to tell, Caruthers?"

"About how one of our noted crooks met with his come-uppance, last night, sir. Jockey Jem they call him, partly because he's an Englishman, I reckon, and may have been a rider; looks as though he'd been brought up in a stable, to my notion, anyway!"

"Jockey Jem—not Cross, is it?" asked Lucksinger with a faint show of growing interest.

"That's his name; Jem Cross. Do you know him, then, Lucksinger?"

"Hardly well enough to call him my friend," came the cool reply. "And so he came to grief, you say?"

"Just that! Had the biggest half of his skull caved in, I reckon, and hardly life enough left in his carcass to make it worth while to take him in charge. A mighty good job it was, too, in my estimation!"

"Who lays claim to that credit, Caruthers?"

"Meaning who slugged him? Oh! that was Lawyer Reeves, of up-town; smart and rich—more of both qualities than he well knows what to do with, too! I never liked him for a cent, but when it comes to laying out slippery crooks like Jockey Jem—well, I can give the gent my compliments, and holler Do it some more!"

"And Jockey Jem is a pal of this fellow of mine, you say?"

"Thick as thieves, which I reckon they were, too! Be a lucky day that marks both off the docket, to my thinking."

German Gus walked a few rods in silence, then spoke again:

"This Cross: where is he, now?"

"Oh, they shifted him to the Holy Shepherd. 'Twas more a case for surgeons than for police, and so the hospital caught Jammy. Little see, though, if I heard it aright: his head is all one smash, they say!"

"There's hope while life lasts, you know," quietly observed Lucksinger, coming to a halt as Caruthers paused, evidently thinking his friendly stroll had led him sufficiently far from his post of duty. "If Mr. Cross is able to talk, possibly he may be in a more communicative mood than was his friend Mason."

"No harm in trying, of course, but I'm thinking you'll have your trouble for your reward. I had it straight. He's a croaker, if he hasn't hopped the twig before this!"

"In that case, we'll have to count on catching another pal, and in that your services will be invaluable, Caruthers. Going back? Well, be good to yourself, and I'll see you later on."

They parted, and then some little distance was covered in silence by the two friends, client and detective.

German Gus was frowning grimly, his strong hands twitching nervously the while. Plainly the tidings he had received shortly before, had a strongly disquieting effect on his brain.

"Am I to go alone, pardner?" presently asked McRustie, as the Go-lightly Detective quickened his pace, like one who has finally reached a decision of some sort.

German Gus gave a little start, staring into that face for a half-score instants with a partly-dazed air. But then he rallied, giving a bit of a laugh before replying:

"Why not, my good friend? Have you no spice of curiosity in your composition, then?"

"Tasting of what, this spice, pardner?"

"Surely you heard: this Jem Cross? An Englishman, a groom, a fellow who is not above stealing—"

"Is that it?" ejaculated McRustie, with a start in his turn. "I thought the name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it until— He was the fellow your lord fancied stole that paper, eh?"

"If not, then there are two men who bear the same name and nationality. If nothing else, 'twill be worth spending a few minutes in finding out that much. Then, too, Caruthers declared Jockey Jem was an intimate pal of Frank Mason, our sulky prisoner with a slit in his skin which was clearly intended to be your ornament, my good friend."

Austin McRustie said nothing in reply. He could readily guess how much the detective hoped to gain by this call, but he hardly knew which way he himself ought to hope.

Would that visit end in still further implicating the woman whom he had once cherished as his dearest possession on earth?

For his part, German Gus was well content to maintain silence. He had ample food for thought. Events were crowding in upon him so rapidly that he could hardly dispose of one before another presented itself for his attention!

The two men reached the hospital known as "The Holy Shepherd" in due time, but as Lucksinger started to enter, Austin McRustie held back.

"I don't reckon you need me, pardner, and so I'll wait on the outside," he said, as Lucksinger gave him an inquiring glance. "I've mighty little taste for sick-rooms, and neatly as they do keep these hospitals, they turn my stomach: one is just one too many for me!"

"Very well, my good friend," assented the detective. "If you would prefer waiting for me here, so let it be. I'll keep you no longer than necessity demands."

"Oh, don't hurry yourself on my account, pardner. I'll take a fresh smoke, and when I feel that way I can enjoy myself loafing bigger'n any critter you ever run up against!"

It was no difficult matter for the detective to obtain admission to the casualty ward, thanks to his badge and a letter of indorsement from the chief of police, which he carried as a convenient key to places which might otherwise prove inaccessible to him, a stranger.

But there was no need of his making a display of either, in this case, since he encountered an acquaintance in the hospital steward from whose lips he quickly gleaned a portion of the information desired.

Yes, there was a patient there registered as James Cross. He was a serious case, yet life lingered, and there was at least a chance for his pulling through with life.

"Through an operation, of course," added the steward, as he guided the detective on his way. "His skull seems fairly splintered to bits, and 'twill be a beautiful operation should it prove successful."

"Then there is little chance of getting Cross to talk a bit, I'm afraid," half-asked German Gus, his brows gathering a bit.

"No chance at all," came the prompt reply. "He isn't sensible, nor will he regain the power of speech while his bones—"

"When will the operation take place—do you know?"

"As soon as the patient seems strong enough to stand the fresh shock. When that will be, if ever, you'll have to ask the surgeon in charge of his case—yonder he is, now!"

The steward pointed out a couple of men standing near a low cot on which rested a patient, and Lucksinger instantly recognized a doctor whom he had met in passing more than once. The person with him was a stranger, but it was something more than empty curiosity which led the detective to ask:

"Who is that with Morrison, my good friend?"

"That gentleman? Eustace Reeves, the lawyer and real-estate agent. He's the man Cross tried to rob last night, only to catch his last sickness, I'm thinking! Don't look much like it, eh?"

Lucksinger made no reply, but there was an oddly-keen glow in his blue eyes as he slowly passed by that cot, taking a grave glance at that pale, motionless figure resting so corpse-like.

The doctor and lawyer were conversing, and Lucksinger gave the steward a look which said he was willing to wait his turn.

"All right, sir. I'll come back shortly. Just now I've a bit of business to attend to. You can get along by yourself, then?"

"Very well, my friend," quietly answered the Go-lightly Detective, turning his back upon the other gentlemen, pausing near another cot where a second patient was sleeping profoundly.

His interest seemed wholly centered right there, and if either of the others noticed his presence, that would account for it.

"Then you think, doctor, the chances are against his recovery?" asked Eustace Reeves in low tones, but loud enough for those intently-listening ears to catch quite clearly.

"I do," came the grave reply. "An operation will have to be performed, if he rallies sufficient strength for that; but even trepanning may fail."

"He may not be able to withstand the shock, you mean, of course?"

"That, for one thing, yes. Then, too, his brain may have received too serious harm for such an operation to prove a complete success."

There was a brief pause, during which Eustace Reeves gazed with a regretful look upon his victim. Then he asked:

"If he should rally, doctor, would he be in full possession of his senses, do you think?"

It was an odd query to put, and German Gus was swift to make a mental note for possible use in the future.

"That is barely possible, of course, but I think the chances are on the other side, Mr. Reeves. He may rally, he may bear up under the operation, and he may eventually go forth as sound a man as you or me; but if I was to hazard a prediction, I would say that Cross will never be better than an idiot in case he recovers physically."

German Gus turned barely sufficient to catch a covert glance at the lawyer's face. That was hidden from the doctor's view, but not so from the detective.

And, almost surely, that was a look of intense relief!

"It's precious little hope you can offer me, doctor," said Reeves, seeming to rally by an effort, his voice trembling perceptibly. "I came here in hopes of far better news, but—what must be, must, I suppose!"

"You have nothing to regret, surely, sir!"

"No, but—it's a terrible thing to have a human life on my hands!"

CHAPTER XX.

GERMAN GUS MISSES HIS CLIENT.

As he uttered these words, Eustace Reeves turned away with a visible shudder, seemingly strongly affected by that thought.

"You are too morbid, my dear sir," the doctor hastened to assure him. "You were fully justified in defending your property, and this fellow brought it all upon himself."

"That may all be true, yet—I can't help feeling that way! And if he should live, even—live, to be an idiot! That seems almost worse than the other alternative!"

"Well, as I stated, the chances are greatly against him, but still he has a chance for recovering entirely. Until we know the worst, isn't it better to take the most cheerful view of the case?"

"For one in your position, no doubt," with a low, forced laugh; then adding hurriedly: "Do your level best for the poor fellow, doctor, and keep me posted. If there is any change—if he should recover his senses, let me know without a moment's delay. I'd like to tell the poor fellow I hold no malice against him—that I'd willingly lose the property he was taking, could I only put him back where he was before our unfortunate meeting!"

Eustace Reeves spoke with strong yet suppressed emotion; then, as though unwilling to task his nerves further, he turned and moved away.

The doctor bore him company, no doubt deeply impressed with such a Christian spirit; but they left behind them one who hardly felt that same way!

"A canting hypocrite, if ever one drew breath of life!" mentally declared the Go-lightly

Detective, maintaining his position until the listening ears told him there was no danger in his turning around. "Mr. Reeves, you are a liar! Now—why did you take so much trouble to impose upon our medical friend? Surely not because you feared prosecution for slugging a burglar, and thought it wise to work up sympathy in advance?"

Letting that point drop for the present, German Gus moved closer to the cot upon which Jockey Jem Cross was lying, breathing perceptibly, yet otherwise resembling a corpse far more than he did a living man.

Only a partial glimpse of his livid face could be obtained, thanks to the bandages with which his terribly injured head was swathed; but what he could see went far toward assuring the detective there had been no mistake made in his first surmise; this was surely the face of an Englishman of the lower class, and enough like the one described to him by his father when mention had been made of the groom suspected by Lord Lechmere of stealing that first written statement.

As he stood there in grave silence, watching that unconscious heap of humanity, the brain of Gustave Lucksinger was very busy.

Could it be possible that, after so many years of fruitless search, the various threads leading back to that mysterious crime at Lechmere Hall were all drawing together before him?

Frank Mason had been this man's mate. Had Jockey Jem been engaged in the affair which brought Mason low? Was that assault upon Austin McRustie really instigated by his recreant wife, the Madame? And was she indeed the one-time opera singer, Giulia Raimando?

All the clews seemed pointing that way, yet German Gus could hardly risk that full belief. After so many years of vain search, was this not entirely too much to expect?

Knowing that he could hope to learn nothing more of importance by lingering there, Gustave Lucksinger turned from the cot on which Jockey Jem Cross was lying, and thoughtfully made his way from that ward, then from the hospital itself.

Just as he was emerging from the front door, he caught sight of Eustace Reeves once more, lingering in the wide hall, talking still with the surgeon. And, an instant later, he recognized a city detective with whom he had some slight acquaintance.

"Hello, Marshall, are you not going astray?" was his quick greeting, as he intercepted the officer when that worthy was just on the point of entering the hospital.

"Not at all, sir. I just came over this way to ask how a fellow named Jockey Jem was getting along this morning."

"The burglar, is it?" in lowered tones, at the same time casting a covert glance toward Eustace Reeves as he re-entered the building with his acquaintance. "Sh! Isn't that the gentleman who downed him?"

"Sure enough!" in like tones. "I didn't see him, or I'd have talked lower."

"No particular harm done, since he didn't catch on," added Lucksinger, slipping a hand through the city detective's arm, leading him a little further to one side. "Not in such a rush, I imagine, pardner?"

"Not to kill, I reckon," with a light laugh. "Why? Can I serve you in any way, Mr. Lucksinger?"

"By helping me kill time while waiting for a belated friend, yes. I was just about leaving, in disgust, when I recognized you. Now—I've heard something about that burglary affair, of last night. Alfred Caruthers spoke of it, but he could give no details. Nothing in the way of a reward, of course, since the fellow was caught?"

"Hardly! I had a glimpse of Jem, and his head looked like an over-ripe tomato that had got in the way of a wagon-wheel!"

"And he did it, eh?" with a covert nod toward Eustace Reeves, who was just leaving the hospital. "Who and what is he, then? Not much for looks, but he must be a holy terror to do a tough nut up so badly!"

There was very little risk in asking these questions, so far as rousing suspicion was concerned. His interest would be set down to purely professional curiosity, such as any detective or law-officer might naturally exhibit under like circumstances.

This was no doubt the point of view taken of it by Marshall, since his answers came promptly, and with quite as much elaboration as one could wish.

Eustace Reeves was a well-known lawyer in Chicago, and likewise did a more than fair business in the real estate line.

He was reputed rich: at least was comfortably well off, so far as a store of this world's goods was concerned.

He lived in good, if quiet style, and was a widower, without any living children. He had few or no relatives save a nephew who lived with his uncle, and who was generally accounted a lucky lad who would probably fall heir to a snug fortune when the lawyer should depart this life.

"But I'm not so mighty sure of that, either," declared Marshall, with a shrewd grimace and nod of the head. "Reeves isn't too old to tackle

another bride, and if he isn't thinking something that way, why have I seen him so frequently in company with the rich widow—eh?"

"Mrs. Kingsley, do you mean?" quietly asked German Gus, coining a name on the spur of the moment.

"Don't know the lady. I mean, Mrs. Deveraux."

Detective Marshall was willing to talk, and Gustave Lucksinger was enabled to glean much more information which instinct told him could do no harm, even if it did not come into play in connection with the Clew of the Thumbless Hand.

He learned where Eustace Reeves lived, and made a mental note of both street and number. He also found out where the "rich widow" dwelt when at home, and registered that fact along with the other.

Then, the better to cover his real objects, and to carry out to the end his professional interest in this case, Lucksinger kept Marshall company during his visit to the cot where Jockey Jem Cross was lying.

Here he left the city detective, however, pleading as an excuse his belief that his friend must be waiting for him at the appointed rendezvous long ere this.

For the first time since seeing Eustace Reeves and catching his odd questions, German Gus gave thought to his client, and as he emerged from the hospital, his first sweeping glance was for Austin McRustie.

No such person was in sight, look which way he might, and feeling just a bit uneasy in his mind, German Gus moved slowly away, peering into each shady nook near by, looking into a couple of saloons which were located not far from the hospital.

But just as often was he foiled. Austin McRustie was nowhere to be seen. He had left, but why?

"Did he mean to give me the shake when he declined entering?" German Gus asked himself, as he abandoned that fruitless search, turning his face homeward once more. "Did it frighten him out, my talk, last night?"

That was a far from comfortable fancy, and yet—what harm could possibly come of it?

Austin McRustie did not know where the Madame lived, so he could not warn her of possible peril. Unless another meeting should take place by accident!

But Gustave Lucksinger quickly rejected this supposition. He was a more than fair judge of human nature, and Austin McRustie was hardly a man to betray one whose hand he had gripped in solemn pledge.

"No, he'll turn up all right, either at his hotel or at my rooms," decided the Go-lightly Detective, hastening his steps. "He was badly shaken by my little story, and feels the need of sober reflection. He will see that I am right, and will come back, all the more eager to help me clear up both mysteries!"

That was a far more consoling belief than his first fear, but German Gus held full faith in it, even after he missed finding Austin McRustie awaiting him at his chambers.

For a brief space the detective hesitated, wondering if it would not be wise for him to call at the Pacific without further delay; but then he decided to the contrary.

"No! If he means to play false, he'll do it all the same. I'll hold faith in him until I have to think different. He's wanting to do a bit of mental ciphering—and that's precisely my fix, too!"

Filling his meerschaum, and leaning far back in his favorite chair, German Gus closed his eyes, giving himself up to busy thought.

He passed in review all the important events which had taken place since he caught that sound of strife, the evening before; and they were many!

Unless his mental acumen and detective instinct were gravely in error, he had made more progress toward solving the mystery so long enveloping the tragedy of the Lechmeres, in those comparatively few hours, than had been done during all those busy years of search and pains-taking investigation.

From point to point his busy brain moved, lingering at length upon Eustace Reeves and his strange manner when beside Jockey Jem Cross.

"Why was he so afraid that Cross might recover his senses, a sane man? What could Cross say to injure one occupying such an honorable position in life? Had he—was it really a burglary, or was that stolen statement at the bottom of it all?"

Gustave Lucksinger started sharply as that thought struck him.

CHAPTER XXI.

DICK ASHTON HEARS THE NEWS.

THAT same morning found Dick Ashton in anything but a hilarious state of mind.

For one thing, he had been unable to sleep at all, partly through expecting the speedy return of Jockey Jem Cross, from whom he meant to extract considerably more information than that worthy had seen fit to volunteer after asking his powerful curiosity with his vague hints as to big game and bigger payment.

For another thing, his bruised eye and swollen cheek pained most annoyingly. None the less either, because Richard rather prided himself on being a hard fellow to do up, with either gloves or without.

Then there were still other thoughts to keep his brain over-busy for sleep; thoughts of that cowardly assault upon a single man, of what their hasty flight must have left behind them, to account for those ugly red blotches on Jockey Jem's hand and sleeve.

Nor was the least of his worries over the abduction of the little milliner, Maggie Lester.

"What does Cross mean to do with her? Who hired him? A young blood, who's struck by that pretty face! It can't be Jem himself, for he never took to petticoats since I've known him."

When the entire list had been passed in review, it was this that worried Dick Ashton the most sorely; this, and the possible fate of poor Rose Hollinger, whom Jockey Jem had so brutally silenced when she came upon the scene at such an untimely moment.

"He's a devil born, and I—I'm worse than a dog for doing his dirty work when he crooks his little finger! I'd ought to—"

There was the sullen stroke of a tightly-clenched fist, as though the broken-down sport was longing to drive a keen blade to the very heart of his brutal taskmaster. But even as he gave this exhibition of hatred Dick Ashton more than doubted if he would ever gather courage to turn in open rebellion.

Taking all things together, then, 'tis not so strange that Dick Ashton appeared in anything but a light-hearted mood when, at a fairly early hour the morning after the assault upon Austin McRustie, he stepped out of doors, casting a moody glance up and down the street in expectation of glimpsing Jockey Jem Cross on his way home.

He had no means of knowing in which direction Cross would come, for he had been kept in ignorance as to his destination; but surely it was high time the fellow was getting back, if only to take closer charge of his fair little prize.

"She'll give him a bit of a tussle, too, or I'm 'way off my base!" Ashton muttered, recalling a brief scene which he had interrupted that morning early, between Maggie and Mother Winkle. "She's not much bigger than a snort of whisky, but she's the pure quill—sure!"

That came with a frown and a half-sigh. That "fit of blues" had not yet left the sport, and the more he took thought, the worse opinion he had of himself and his present mode of "vins."

"'Twasn't always that way. I was a man—once!"

That was too bitter a thought for cherishing, and Dick Ashton wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to take a bit of a turn down the street to where he could get a dram of something strong enough to wash that ugly taste out of his mouth.

Almost unconsciously the seedy sport was taking that very turn, when a roughly-clad fellow came slouching around the corner just ahead of him, stopping short as though a criminal instinct warned him of possible peril ahead, even before his bleared eyes took notice of that tall figure in his path.

Only for an instant; then recognition was mutual, and the fellow quickened his steps perceptibly, giving a stealthy glance around before speaking—the glance of a natural-born crook!

"Hellow, Dickey! Pretty rough—you caught some of it, too, didn't you, me covey?" abruptly altering his address as he caught sight of that beautifully blackened eye and bruised cheek.

"From a mighty sight better man than ever stood in your shoes, then, Jim Farley!" came the gruff retort.

"That's all right, but isn't it—You're taking mighty long chances, 'pears to me, Dickey!"

"How so? Think I'll catch cold in this?" gingerly touching that bad eye with a finger-tip, forcing a chuckle at the same time. "Thanks, old man, but I'm not quite such a tender chicken as you try to make me out."

"Then you wasn't—Where's Jockey, this morning?" asked Farley, with a curious interest coming into his bleared eyes.

"About his business, I suppose. Why ask me?"

"Then you haven't heard? You wasn't with him on that lay, last night?"

"Heard what? Speak out, Jim Farley, or I'll—Don't make me hit you, for if I should, your friends couldn't enjoy a funeral, for they'd never find enough of your carcass to make a splurge over!"

"Don't, man!" shrinking back from that menacing fist. "I reckoned you knew it all, even if you wasn't in it with Jockey, sure!"

"Knew what? Last asking, pardner!"

"That Jem's got it, bad!"

"Got what, you infernal fool?"

"Laid out to stay, 'long of cracking a crib, last night!"

Dick Ashton gave a start and a cry, for this was far from being what he expected. Jockey Jem Cross "laid out!" Jem Cross hurt while in the act of "cracking a crib!"

It seemed impossible, and yet—why had he

not put in an appearance before this, unless something had gone seriously wrong with the plans for "big money" which he had hinted at?

Before Dick Ashton could collect himself sufficiently to ask any further questions, Jim Farley hastily explained, but without telling exactly how it chanced that he had been in the same neighborhood when the alarm was given at the house of Eustace Reeves.

Enough that he had a tolerably accurate story, and poured it forth with a morbid interest such as only one crook can feel in the misfortunes of another criminal.

True, he had only secured a passing glimpse of Jockey Jem as the ex-groom was carried from house to ambulance, and his own reputation was too shady for him to risk any open questions, just then.

"But I knew where the ambulance hailed from, and I took a short cut by the alley-route," he explained further. "I was on deck when they ran Jemmy in, and so—well, I made out that his head was pretty much all of a mush, and that if he didn't croak before sun-up, he'd be in mighty big luck!"

"Which station was it?" asked Ashton, by this time having regained a little self control. "Quick! I'm going to see—"

"Then it's another direction you want to take, mate," came the interruption. "If Jockey had been smart on his pins, they'd have froze tight fast to him only too gladly, but as he was a croaker—well, they shunted him off on the other track."

"What do you mean by that, Farley?"

"Sent him one step nigher the bone-yard, of course," with a nervous little laugh as he cast a shy glance over his shoulder.

"To the hospital, you mean?"

Farley nodded assent as the briefest method of answering.

"To which one?"

"The Holy Shepherd. I took that much of a chance, so I might let Jem's pals know where to look for him. And came mighty nigh getting run in for it, too!"

"Not simply for asking a question, surely?"

"Well, on general principles, I reckon," grinning faintly. "They're getting too hard on lads who can't show a bank-book nowadays, Dickey!"

Dick Ashton stood with downcast eyes, grinding his iron-shod heel into a little crack between two stones. His face looked unusually pale just then, and a sly, half-sneering expression stole into the face of his present companion as he noted this fact.

More than ever he believed that Ashton knew far more about the mishap which had befallen his associate than he had seen fit to let on about.

Ashton was thinking: swift thoughts, and a strange mixture they were, too!

Never to date had he willingly gone back on a friend, and though he could scarcely place Jem Cross in that category, still he had been living with and working under the Englishman of late.

Jockey Jem held his liberty if not his life at his mercy. Only that very night last spent, he had brutally reminded Ashton of this power, using it to quell a possible mutiny on his part.

Now—dead, or dying!

Should he profess sorrow and regret? Should he go out of his way to lend his brutal taskmaster aid and comfort, should such assistance lie in his power? Would it not be wiser to lie low, letting fate take its course, rather than invite—"

A hot flush came into his pale face at the thought, and Dick Ashton proved himself far more of a man than his present associations would indicate.

"Where did you say they'd moved Jockey, pardner?" he asked, brushing a hand swiftly across his face, like one dispelling an ugly mist.

"To the Holy Shepherd, Dick. But—you haven't asked who downed your pard; I thought that would come pretty nigh first, with you!"

"So it ought, but—you struck me all of a heap with your news, man! Who did it, then?"

"You've heard of Lawyer Reeves, I reckon?"

"Not that I remember. Did he do the job? And how came it about?"

Farley gave a brief but tolerably accurate account of the affair, from the Reeves standpoint, then added, gravely:

"From what I know of the fellow, Dick, he's mighty bad medicine! He is one of these sanctimonious whelps who'll go a thousand miles just to get in a kick at a poor devil who's taken a stumble for the gutter!"

"Then, even if poor Jockey pulls through his hurt, he'll have to stand trial, you reckon?"

"Sure as grass is green, my boy! And so—I reckon if I'd been mixed up in that bit of job, I'd lay mighty low! Reeves'll turn the whole town upside down but what he'll make a clean sweep, now he's got his hand in."

There was a thinly-veiled warning in these words which Ashton was keen enough to detect, but instead of flinching or showing confusion, as Farley clearly expected, he forced a faint smile as he spoke:

"That's all right, pardner. You mean well, and I'm thanking you for the goodwill; but I've no occasion to go into retirement, just now."

"Then—that's a pretty bad eye of yours, Dickey!"

"A better man than your Lawyer Reeves gave it to me, though. You're 'way off, pardner. I'm living straight, now, if I do say it myself!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER SURPRISE FOR RICHARD.

"WELL, you're in big luck if you can afford it, pardner," said Jim Farley, with a shrug of his sloping shoulders. "No offense, I hope?"

"Thanks instead," and Ashton gripped his hand, warmly. "You meant it for my good, Jim, and I'll remember it as heartily as though I really stood in need of such a warning."

"Don't mention it, then. You'd do just as much for me, of course."

"That's no lie, either! Now—I'm going to look after poor Jem. Will you go along, Farley?"

The fellow drew hastily back, giving another significant shrug of his shoulders before replying:

"Excuse me, pardner! I was born bashful, and just now I've got the disease worse than ever."

"You're not on the run, surely?"

"Not quite that bad, but it'd be mighty poor policy in me to invite closer inspection: and you—They'll put a black mark on all who show any particular interest in Jockey, be dead sure of so much!"

"That may be, but he has been my pal, and I'll not go back on him just when he may need me the worst. Then—you'd rather not go?"

"Will horses couldn't haul me!" declared Farley, backing still further away. "So-long, Dickey! Hope you'll not be sorry you weren't a bit more bashful—just like me!"

As though he more than half-suspected Ashton of an intention to secure his company by main force, Jim Farley beat a hasty retreat, turning the nearest corner as quickly as his nimble legs could carry him, without actually breaking into a run.

Ashton watched him until that disappearance was final, then turned and slowly made his way back to the house which he had recently left.

His mind was fully decided on calling at the hospital to see how Jockey Jem was faring, but before he took such a step, there was another matter he must look after.

What was to be done with the girl whom he had aided Cross in abducting, now that Jockey Jem was in such sore trouble?

"If he'd only told me something more while he was about it! If I only knew just how much was at stake, even! What if I turn the girl loose, as I'd like to do, only—how would that affect pard?"

Look at it in whatever light he could muster with his poor information, this was a sore puzzle for Ashton to solve.

He had not found the wished-for clew by the time he reached the building in which Jockey Jem had placed his prize for safe keeping, and finding that he was only muddling his wits still more completely by trying, he resolved to interview Mother Winkle, on the chance of her being more thoroughly posted.

The woman met him just as his feet crossed the threshold, scowling blackly until she recognized a friend of her employer.

"You, then, is it, me lad? Didn't ye know better than to try to come in without giving the right sign?"

"If there is a sign—"

"Didn't Mr. Cross tell ye, then?"

"Never a word that way, Mother Winkle, but—Jem's had bad luck!"

"What do ye mean by that, lad?" anxiously asked the woman, her face betraying how uneasy those words made her feel.

"He's slipped up on a job, and they've got him—"

"Not the peelers? Not for— Surely they couldn't have found out this quick about the girl?"

"It's nothing about the girl," Ashton made haste to assure, and he believed what he said, too. "Jockey tried to crack a crib last night, after he left here, and was caught at work. So I was told by a friend, just now, out on the pave. And he said Jem was badly hurt, too!"

Mother Winkle flung up her hands, seeming too greatly shocked to utter even an exclamation. So Ashton reasoned, and this determined him to postpone questioning her concerning the object Cross had in abducting Maggie Lester, until after he had paid a visit to the hospital.

"It's nothing about the girl, I'm pretty sure, Mother Winkle, but I'll know more after I've contrived to have a word or two with Cross."

"Then he isn't—not clean murdered, lad?"

"No. He's at one of the hospitals, so I was told. I'm going there now to see him, if possible. While I'm gone, do you take good care of the girl, though. She's not—not pining much?"

"The impudent baggage, then!" with a flash of fire in eyes and in voice. "I'll break her back, or break her spirit, lad!"

"How will you answer to Cross, afterward, Mother Winkle? Play easy until he comes home, or you may feel the weight of his fist!"

Not caring to linger longer, and knowing that his warning would be all the more impressive because of its very vagueness, Dick Ashton left the house once more, turning in the direction of the hospital, the location of which he chanced to know, although he was by no means perfectly familiar with that great city.

A Western lad and man, Dick Ashton was far more thoroughly versed in wild life of the mining regions than with city existence. Time and again had he cursed his folly in coming to Chicago, for it was there that he had fallen into the power of the Englishman.

He was thinking of this as he walked rapidly along, and he was trying to cipher out just how much it might mean to him if Jockey Jem should die without regaining sufficient consciousness to lay bare his black secrets—among them that one which he held in menace over his head!

Dick Ashton was not *all* bad. Under more favorable circumstances he might have proved an honor to his race. But—the same old story: he was his own worst enemy, and put into his mouth the enemy which surely stole away his brains!

Buried with dark, troubled thoughts, Dick Ashton at length came in sight of the great building which served as a hospital, and as he first caught sight of its walls, back flashed that warning covertly given him by Jim Farley.

True, he had taken no part in the affair for which Jockey Jem was paying such a heavy price, but—there were other affairs!

What would be the outcome of that attempted "slugging"? Had Cross indeed murdered their victim? If so, would not the police be on the alert?

"What became of Mason, and Tony? Were they nabbed? Would they blow the gash, when pinched? If so—Who's that, yonder?"

While asking himself these questions, Dick Ashton came near enough to the front entrance to note a tall, muscular figure slowly pacing to and fro near that massive portal.

"Not in uniform, but is that a sign? Maybe he's a cop in mufti, waiting to trap— Shall I, or sha'n't I?"

Instead of being a detective, or a policeman in plain clothes, that leisurely-pacing figure belonged to Austin McRustie, placidly smoking his cigar while waiting for German Gus to pay his visit to the cot of the injured burglar.

It chanced that McRustie caught sight of Ashton at nearly the same time. Dick observed Austin, and, though to a lesser degree, the mine-owner also became interested in the other.

There seemed something dimly familiar to his eyes in that tall, muscular, slightly slouching figure, but he partly averted his eyes and maintained his leisurely pace, lest he frighten the fellow away before he could fully decide just when and where he had met him.

After a brief hesitation, Ashton slouched his felt hat a bit further over his face, then advanced. He meant to enter the hospital unless actually intercepted; but as he drew nearer, his dread of arrest grew greater, and he made as though he would pass directly by.

He had not recognized the stranger whom Jockey Jem pointed out as the one they must "do up," but as he was in the act of passing, Austin McRustie made a double discovery; surely that blackened eye was like his own rough hand-painting? And, even more surely, he had met this tall fellow before, under very different circumstances!

"Can it be?" he ejaculated, in tones of glad surprise, then starting forward with extended hands, his face lighted up as only the face of a stranger in a strange city can at sight of a familiar countenance. "Jack Hardress, by all that's good and lucky! Put'er there, pard, for ninety days!"

Before Ashton could fairly realize it, his hands were gripped in a cordial grasp, being shaken forcibly, while McRustie was laughing and talking, all in a single breath.

"Why, man, dear, I'd rather see your honest old face than meet my great grandfather! You here—and I was only thinking of you, and wondering what on earth had become of old Jack Hardress, only the other day—I was, for an honest fact, now!"

"I don't—it's McRustie!" hesitated Ashton, almost feebly.

"Aus. McRustie, old rocks! And gladder to see you than—so glad it's turned my thrapple dry as a dead cactus leaf on a burnt prairie! Come, pardner, and le's hit a bottle—just for luck, and the good old times!"

Slipping a hand through an arm, McRustie hurried his newly-met friend away, turning the first corner, in mortal fear all the time lest German Gus should put in an appearance and take note of his companion.

Although Ashton had not recognized him, as yet, for a party in that little fracas of the night last past, McRustie felt morally certain that this seedy sport had been one of his assailants on that occasion.

If so, he thought, would it not be possible to forestall the Go lightly Detective at his own

game? Might he not be able to put those haunting suspicions as to the Madame being implicated in that attempt at murder forever to flight?

At least, it seemed well worth the trial, and toward that end the bluff schemer bent all his skill and energies.

He hurried Dick Ashton into the nearest saloon for a drink, but then, thinking it possible he might be looked after there when he was missed by Luckinger, he passed on further pleading hunger as an excuse.

"I was just trying to get up an appetite when you came my way, pardner," he assured in breezy tones. "But now—your face was my tonic, and I'm hungry as a wolf! And dry—oh, but won't we crack the bottles in honor of the good old days, though!"

Ashton yielded, though almost sullenly. In this meeting he had forgotten Jockey Jim, temporarily, and he too was thinking over those days far away in the mining regions, where he could afford to ruffle it with the best of them all!

McRustie did not rest until they were snugly seated in a cozy private apartment in connection with the restaurant, with food and drink before them, and then, for the first time he appeared to notice how exceedingly seedy his present companion had become.

Instantly he was thrusting a handful of money upon Ashton, bluntly ordering him to stow it away, unless he wished a fight over it.

"For the good old days, when you knew my wife, pardner!" he ended.

CHAPTER XXII.

ENLISTING AN ENEMY.

INSTANTLY that money fell from Dick Ashton's hand upon the table, the seedy-looking sport drawing back with an expression of mingled anger and humiliation.

Austin McRustie had spoken with a purpose, hoping to catch his old acquaintance by surprise if, indeed, he knew anything concerning the Madame; but this was not exactly what he had looked for.

"Why, pardner, surely you're not too proud to accept a loan from an old-time friend?" he ejaculated, counterfeiting surprised mortification with admirable success.

He pushed the bills a bit nearer the sport, and Ashton looked at them almost hungrily. 'twas long since he had seen so much money at his disposal, but even as his hands itched to clutch those valuable bits of paper, his remaining manhood revolted.

"I'm worse than a cur, or I'd never have touched it—your money!" he muttered, gloomily.

"Why wouldn't you, then?"

For the first time since that meeting took place their eyes were permitted to meet squarely on both sides. Ashton spoke more like his old resolute self, too.

"Well, I hated you in those old days, and 'twas only this same week that I was cursing you from the very bottom of my soul!"

There was no room left for doubting Ashton's perfect sincerity on this point, and Austin McRustie was too shrewd to attempt passing it off as a joke. Then, too, might not this be the very opening for which he had been seeking?

"What makes you talk that way, pardner?" he asked, gravely, finding it a difficult matter to choose from among the many questions which suggested themselves to his busy brain. "Maybe I'm not any too good to be a mark for cussing, but surely you can't hold a grudge against my ducats?"

"Why wouldn't I, then? How can I help it, rather?" almost fiercely answered Dick Ashton.

"You tell, pard, for I'm blessed if I know how to begin!"

Ashton drew himself up, spreading out his arms like one who invites a full inspection.

"Take a look at us both, Aus. McRustie! We're both men, I reckon, and one as white as the other, to look at. But I'm down in the gutter, while you are—I saw your wife and daughter the other day, and that sight brought it all back to me with a reality that came mighty nigh driving me wild!"

"You saw—"

"I saw her, yes!" harshly interrupted the fallen sport. "Saw her, looking almost as youthful and even more beautiful than in those old days when I loved her better than you ever knew how, Aus. McRustie!"

"I loved her—I tell you that to your very face, man! I loved her, and if I could have won her for my wife, she would have made a man of me, too!"

Austin McRustie was silenced by that flood of words, and seemed almost frightened by them, so unnaturally pale was his face.

In reality it was caused by strong emotion at finding how surely proof was coming his way that his eyesight had not played him false when he caught sight of "the Madame," only with locks of gold in place of the familiar jet.

By the time Dick Ashton broke off, his head drooping and his voice turned husky, McRustie had decided upon his course of action, and his first words came in grave, troubled tones:

"There's a big mistake out somewhere, pard-

ner, when you say you've lately seen my wife and daughter, for—I've lost 'em both!"

Dick Ashton gave a start, lifting his eyes toward that grave face, his own taking on a frown of suspicion as he sharply demanded:

"What're you trying to give me now? Can't I believe my own eyes, think?"

"It looks as though a man had ought to be sure of so much, but when they tell him—How long ago was it you saw that, Jack?"

"They told me just this!" his clinched fist striking the table between them with added emphasis. "They saw your wife—she whom you used to call the Madame—only last Monday!"

"So you think, Hardress, but—"

"Don't I know? When a man once loved a woman as I loved Josephine Tudor, he's hardly apt to forget her face or figure. I knew hers, both, and none the less because she was wearing a stage-wig, or else had dyed her hair yellow!"

Neither man noticed the oddity of this combination of passion and fashion-notes, for both were in too deep earnest.

Austin McRustie felt that his belief was being fully confirmed, and he determined not to lose sight of this chance until it had given him full knowledge.

"When and where did you see this—my wife?" he asked, gravely.

"In her carriage, day before yesterday for the last time."

Dick Ashton spoke with sharp decision. If he, too, had been deceived by a marvelous resemblance in face and figure, that deception was thorough; he firmly believed all he was saying, and McRustie gave him full credit for so much honesty, at least.

"Can you tell me where she hangs out—where her house is located, pardner?" came his next question.

"Eh? You want to know—you?" ejaculated Ashton, beginning to realize that there was something strange in all this affair.

Austin McRustie believed that the time had come for him to make a more decided move, and adding several other bills to the bank-notes which still lay upon the table, he pushed the little pile toward Dick Ashton, deliberately saying as he did this:

"That's all yours, pardner, if you'll simply point out her house to my two looking eyes!"

More than ever amazed, still deeper astonished, the seedy sport stared at that pale, but resolute face across the table for the space of a single breath in silence. Then he exploded, with:

"Show you where your own wife lives, man?"

"I have no wife!" almost harshly retorted the mine-owner. "I have lost both my daughter and the woman who was once my wife."

"You haven't—don't I know, curse you? Didn't I see her?"

"You saw some one, no doubt, but I say it over: I have lost my wife," gravely persisted McRustie.

"Honest, now?"

"Would a man lie about such a terrible grief, Hardress? I know I've been called a pretty tough nut in my day, but when it comes to that, you give me too much credit for nerve—not to say gall!"

Austin McRustie suited his words to his company. He knew pretty well what would have the strongest effect on this wild fellow, and so acted accordingly.

Dick Ashton was silenced, if not wholly convinced. And yet, how could he even doubt such evidence?

Little by little he grew to believe his one-time friend, and to discredit the evidence of his own senses.

"Of course, you'd ought to know best, pardner," he said, a little unsteadily, his face betraying trouble, but his left hand almost unconsciously moving toward that little pile of bank-notes, until his finger-tips could softly touch their edges.

Time had been when he would have struck any man who would dare offer him money for less than money's worth, but now—he had been "harding with swine," over-long to be so jealous of his honor.

"You do know best, of course," he repeated, as McRustie maintained perfect silence. "Still, I can't make it seem right! I never thought I could mistake Josephine Tudor for another woman? And this one was her dead moral!"

"The Madame's hair was black, as I recall it, pardner."

"And this one was a blonde! Yet—I could have sworn she was the woman I knew, back yonder! Never a change—just as proudly beautiful as ever! She looked as though time had passed her by untouched, too!"

"Yet 'twas good long ten years since you last met my wife, wasn't it, Hardress?" quietly asked McRustie. "And each year counts up mighty fast after a woman crosses a certain life-mark!"

"But—that perfect likeness!" persisted Ashton, his fingers now fluttering the ends of those bank-notes.

"I know," soberly spoke up the tempter, believing the right time for action had drawn near.

"I saw the same woman, I'm pretty sure, only

last week. But you—sure 'twas this week you saw her, Hardress?"

"On Monday, in the morning, I tell you, Mac. She was driving along in a private carriage—the livery told so much—and on the back seat with her was your—a young lady, that is," making the correction, as he doubtless deemed it, with something of an effort.

"You knew my little girl, too, Jack; was this one anything like what you remember my Myrtle?"

"She had dark hair, didn't she, pardner?"

"Rich chestnut, yes. And this one, Hardress?"

"Was another blonde! But—if I'd been drinking freely this morning, pardner, I'd be willing to make oath I was drunk as a fiddler's pup!" almost angrily ejaculated the bewildered sport.

"Well, I can go bail that you're not slewed this morning, pardner," declared McRustie, speaking and looking more like his breezy, off-hand self once more. "And I can take my davy I hadn't touched a drop of anything stronger than coffee the time I caught sight of the very woman you're dreaming over."

"And—you stick it out that she wasn't your wife, man?"

"I thought we'd settled all that, Hardress," with a return to his gravity once more. "But, there's one thing I can't make oath to, and that is just this:

"Such an extraordinary likeness—in all but color of hair and fairness of complexion—surely must mean something more than pure accident!"

"What do you mean by that? How, accident?"

"Well, it's just like this, pardner. You know what a chase the Madame led me before she would consent to be turned into the Madame! She was a rich and rare prize in more eyes than mine, remember?"

"Don't I?" with a half-unconscious sigh, as his memory turned back to those days of old when one woman set scores of good men almost crazy with honest desire.

"And so, when I carried off the prize at last, I was right well content with my bargain. Too perfectly satisfied to think much about her past life or her possible relatives."

"Then you think this woman is one of them?"

"What else can I think, Jack?" with a slight frown. "As I said before, such a marvelous resemblance can hardly be without its meaning, and it's just possible this woman may prove to be a sister or some other relative to the Madame."

"That was the idea which first struck me, after glimpsing the fair stranger, and I naturally thought it my duty to look her up; I couldn't introduce myself then and there, for I was on one side of a jinn, she on the other. Before it broke up—well, that chance was lost!"

"I have been looking for her ever since, but without success. If you can show me where she lives—can you, Jack?"

That query came like a bullet, but it missed the hoped-for mark.

"I would if I knew, but I don't, pardner," answered Ashton.

McRustie felt disappointed, and betrayed as much in his face. Still, he resolved to make the best of it, and once more called attention to the money lying on the table.

"You're not so steadily occupied, pardner, but that you can find time to do a favor for an old friend?"

"Just busy dodging the police, and rustling for crumbs!" bitterly laughed the seedy sport.

"Well, you'll work all the more willingly for me, I'm sure. Take the little boddle, Jack, old man, and try to find out where that woman with the yellow hair lives when she's at home. When you make that discovery, fetch word to me, and I'll double your stake."

Ashton hesitated briefly, although those bills were tempting him strongly. Then he said:

"How'll I find you, if that time ever comes?"

"I'll leave you my address, or—where are you hanging out, Jack?"

"You've said it, pard. I'm not living anywhere; just hanging out!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOMETHING LIKE A WHITE ELEPHANT.

AUSTIN MCROSTIE was quick to see that he had touched upon a tender point in asking this question, and wisely let it pass without comment, covering his silence by finding a hotel card, on which he scrawled his name and the number of his room.

Passing this across the table to Ashton, he added:

"That will find me, pardner, at any hour of the day or night. Just ring me up if I'm not in sight when you call—as you will, of course! It's a bargain between man and man, old fellow!"

Ashton had to touch those precious bits of paper before making reply, but then he spoke:

"Well, I'll see what I can do for you, McRustie. If I can't fetch you the information you're paying so liberally for, be sure I'll bring back your money in its place."

"No, you'll not," bluntly declared the mine-owner, rising to his feet as he spoke. "That's

what the law-sharps would call a retaining fee; yours, whether you do anything in return for it or not. I'll pay for your information when you fetch it, understand?"

"But—I hate like sin to touch it!" moodily muttered Ashton.

"Give it to the waiter, then," said McRustie, with a little chuckle. "Now, pardner, I'm going back to my hotel. I feel as though I wanted to do some thinking on my own hook. So-long! Good luck attend your search—and that's a double wish for my side, don't you see?"

Without giving Ashton a chance to raise further objections, Austin McRustie hastily withdrew.

Even then Dick Ashton did not immediately pocket the money of which he stood in such sore need. There was a flush of half-shame, half-anger upon his cheeks as he sat staring at the notes.

For years he almost savagely hated this man, whom fortune had covered with so many priceless favors. It was bitter as death to take his bounty, but—wouldn't he be an idiot to refuse, after all that had been said?

That flush deepened upon his cheeks, but Ashton pocketed the money, then hurriedly left the room, after learning that his recent companion had settled accounts for both.

Austin McRustie was nowhere in sight when Ashton gained the street, and for a few moments he "hung in the wind," debating whether or now he ought not to hurry after the mine-owner to his hotel, and there return the money which seemed to fairly burn in his pocket.

It was a revival of his former manhood, but did not last long. With an inward curse, Dick Ashton slouched his hat further over that by no means ornamental eye of his, then hurried off toward the hospital where he had learned Jockey Jem Cross was lying, dead or in deathly peril.

But he was fated not to see his injured pal, for he was checked almost at the threshold by the private detective on duty there, who instinctively set Ashton down as a crook, the instant he caught sight of that discolored optic.

"No, he's not dead, but he's pretty nigh as good as that," came the gruff reply to Dick's question. "It'd save law expenses if he should croak. What is he to you, anyway, my pretty fellow?"

"Well, he did me a good turn, once, when I needed it mighty bad."

"Helped you cheat the police, maybe?"

"You can't prove it if he did," came the retort, which would have taken another shape, perhaps, had not Ashton been really anxious to do what lay in his power to assist the luckless Englishman. "But that don't count, sir, and now—can't I see Cross?"

"You surely can't, and that ends it!"

"Then—not for you, of course, sir," apologetically, as he drew forth a bank-note. "But maybe his nurse would—I'd like him to have all the care and comforts which money could buy, you see?"

The detective pointed toward the door in silence. Ashton dared not make matters worse by entering a protest, knowing as he did how much depended upon his keeping out of serious trouble.

"All right, sir," he said, with a meekness strange in one of his fiery temper. "I'll go, because this isn't the place to mix up in a row, but maybe I'll get leave to see my pard, from Headquarters!"

"You've already a permit to pull-foot, and if you're at all wise you'll be making the best of it."

Ashton left the hospital, turning his face toward the house to which Jockey Jem Cross had conducted their fair captive taken the night before.

His thoughts were anything but agreeable, for whichever way he might turn, trouble and perplexities seemed to stare him full in the face.

Not the least of his troubles lay right ahead, whither he was now directing his steps.

If Cross died, or if he did not speedily recover his senses sufficiently to give Ashton more light on that point, what was to be done with Maggie Lester?

He could not keep her a prisoner on his own account. What would he do with her, as such? Yet he hardly dared think of setting her at liberty, knowing what high hopes Jockey Jem had entertained as to that risky little speculation.

"Unless Mother Winkle is better posted, looks like I'm up a stump!" was about the only conclusion he could reach, during that brisk walk.

Dick Ashton paused at the front door to give a rap as nearly as he could remember modeled after that by which Jockey Jem had announced his coming to Mother Winkle that night; but no response coming in a reasonable length of time, he turned the catch and entered.

He met no one, and it was only after he had passed pretty well toward the rear of the second story, that he heard any sounds of occupancy.

Then he caught the irate voice of Mother Winkle, and a dark frown came into his face as

he divined the truth: that virago was wreaking her spite on the little milliner!

"Quiet, ye bloomin' hussy!" were the first words he caught with anything like distinctness. "I'll buck and gag ye, so I will! I'll thrash ye until your back streams blood, if ye don't!"

"Go easy, Mother Winkle!" cried Ashton, as he pushed that door open and flashed a glance over the scene: the hag fiercely menacing Maggie Lester, who stood in half defiance behind a chair, the wooden back of which her little hands were firmly grasping, much as though she meditated turning it into a weapon of assault, as well!

For one so diminutive in size and proportions, the little milliner was ruffling up almost fiercely, but an instant change came over her manner as she caught sight of that tall figure beyond Mother Winkle.

"Make her be silent, sir!" Maggie cried, stamping her little foot imperiously as she spoke. "Send her away, please?" her tones softening until they seemed childlike, yet oh! so coaxing.

"The impudence of that, now!" gasped Mother Winkle, taken all aback. "Would ye think it, Dickey, lad? She swore she'd tear my two eyes out if I so much as touched her with the tip of me finger, even!"

"And so I would, only— You'll not let her whip me, sir?"

"Never a bit of it, my child," declared Ashton, stoutly, smiling at that girlish face as it turned toward him in appeal. "You're cutting up entirely too rusty, Mother Winkle, and if Jem—"

"Sh!" sharply interjected the woman, finger touching lips as her broad back turned toward the captive. "He's coming home, then, Dickey?"

"I'll explain later. Just now— What appears to be the matter with you, anyway?"

"She swore she'd not be kept here any longer, and—"

"Why should I be, sir?" interrupted Maggie, stepping from behind her chair, holding forth both little hands in appeal as she drew closer to the stalwart sport. "What terrible crime have I committed that I am treated like this? Surely you—you never helped abuse me so?"

Mother Winkle burst into a coarse, insulting laugh which brought an indignant flush to Maggie's cheeks, even before the words came to match that cachinnation:

"Ware cats, me lad! She's not forgetting that she's a woman, nor that you're a man! She'll be asking for a buss, ere long, looks like!"

"Quiet, I say!" sternly ordered Ashton, but Mother Winkle was not to be put down so readily.

"It's from your betters that I take me orders from, Dick Ashton! And you, smart missy, this lad helped fetch you here last night! Now, my two precious pets, kiss and make friends if ye can!"

For Maggie was shrinking visibly from the one to whom she had so impulsively appealed, and the sport was scowling sulkily.

Still, the little milliner was not to be wholly cheated out of her fancied chance, and recovering, spoke earnestly:

"What harm have I ever done you, sir? Why should you help do me such abominable wrong? Why am I kept here, when—"

"I can't tell you if I would, Miss Lester," gravely said Ashton, as her voice choked for the moment. "I don't know just why or what for, my own self—and that's honest Injun!"

"Then—let me go free! If you have no object to gain in keeping me a prisoner like this, let me return to my friends once more!"

"I can't do that, either, without orders from the boss," moodily answered the man, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, plainly wishing himself well through the task, yet hardly knowing how to take his departure.

If his adversary had only been a man, now! But a woman—one moment seeming a little child, the next a woman! That was an entirely different thing to Dick Ashton.

"Who is this bos-, as you call him?" asked Maggie, after a brief silence, during which she was closely inspecting the sport.

"Go easy, lad!" came the warning voice of Mother Winkle.

"I can't tell you that, either, ma'am," moodily answered Ashton. "But, can't you guess? Who is it that's dead mashed on your trim figure and pretty face, eh?"

A hot flush came into that same face, but its owner boldly replied:

"No one mean enough to misuse a poor girl like this, sir! And now, sir, I ask you like a lady, to let me go free. Will you do it?"

"I only wish I might, but that's altogether out of the question, Miss Lester."

"Then—mark my words, you great big brute!" cried Maggie, her eyes regaining the defiant glitter which they had so briefly before showed Mother Winkle.

"I'll alarm the whole neighborhood! I'll scream like a madwoman! I'll never rest, nor permit either of you evil brutes to rest! I'll scream out until the police come to punish you—so I will, now!"

"I trust you'll not be so foolish as to try, Miss Lester," coldly spoke up the sport. "If you do, worse may befall you."

"What do you mean by that? What can be worse than this treatment?"

"I'm left here to guard you, and I'll do my duty, even if I have to both bind and gag you. Still, I'll see that you are not harmed nor insulted, if you'll act at all sensibly."

CHAPTER XXV.

A PINCH OF WHITE POWDER.

EUSTACE REEVES was even better than his word, for he did not wait for tidings to be sent him in relation to the injured burglar, Jockey Jem Cross.

That same afternoon he sent a servant to inquire after the poor fellow, and at a tolerably early hour the morning after, he came in person, so great was his anxiety.

"I hardly know how to explain it, my dear sir," he almost humbly spoke, to the house-surgeon, after being assured that no particular change was to be reported in the patient's condition. "It sounds weak, if not silly, in a man of my caliber, but—such is the naked fact!"

"I haven't rested easily since that unlucky hour! As often as I fall asleep, I am forced to live that horrible scene over again! I see him, as I saw him then, starting toward me, with murder glowing in his eyes! I strike—ugh!" breaking off with a shiver of nervous disgust.

All this was very simple, the surgeon declared. His nerves had been severely strained, and he needed a tonic to build them up again.

With full faith in his own words, he wrote out a prescription and recommended Mr. Reeves to take it regularly.

"I'll warrant you those nightmare dreams will flee, never to come back again. If you do chance to dream of that fellow, you'll be congratulating yourself on dealing out to him at least a portion of the dose he was almost surely preparing for the man who interrupted him in his professional avocation!"

Mr. Reeves pocketed the bit of paper, but shook his head with a faint, hardly hopeful sigh. That was almost too good news to believe!

He expressed a wish to see the patient, and the house-surgeon at once granted his request. He had an eye on a bit of choice property which Eustace Reeves controlled, as agent, and if he could do aught to cement the natural good-will of that gentleman, why not?

As the two gentlemen approached the cot upon which rested the form of the injured Englishman, a neatly garbed hospital nurse slowly shifted his position, bending over a patient close by, gently raising his head sufficiently high to make sipping from that glass an easier task.

Eustace Reeves glanced at that white-aproned, neat-capped figure, with a slight deepening of the glint in his keen, dark eyes.

"You have changed nurses since I was here, yesterday, doctor?" he whispered, detecting the difference in build, although the dress was precisely the same.

"Yes, I believe so. Morrison was sent to the fifth ward, and this man took his place. Jarley assigned him, I believe. He's a good hand, judging from the little I've seen of him, since."

As though divining the subject of those low sentences, the new nurse faced their way, quietly saluting the house-surgeon, and slightly bowing toward the lawyer.

It was a commonplace face enough, and after politely acknowledging that bow, Eustace Reeves gave the new nurse no further thought.

He stood for a few moments gazing down upon that ghastly, pale face, now more exposed to the eye since the bandages had been renewed and adjusted after a different fashion.

Now, as he had been on the former occasion, Jockey Jem Cross seemed insensible, only his slow, regular but faint breathing gave token of life instead of the death that quietude looked.

The lawyer was very pale as he gazed upon the work of his hands, but there seemed only grief, not remorse, in either eyes or in face.

"And there has been no change?" he asked, after a brief period of this silence. "The poor fellow has lain like this ever since he was brought here, you tell me?"

The surgeon turned a quick glance from patient to lawyer, as though this question surprised him. Then he spoke:

"Pretty much like this, I suppose, except during the operation."

"The—what?" ejaculated Reeves, so sharply that the new nurse turned a look that way.

"The operator, I said, Mr. Reeves. Surely you don't mean to say that you never knew?"

"Knew what, doctor? I only know that I had word of no change, and so—I thought I'd learn this morning, probably, when something would be attempted. Now—are you jesting, doctor?"

"Why should I jest, pray?" with a touch of hauteur in his tones.

"Well, you spoke of an operation, and so—"

"An operation it was, then, and a most beautiful one, too!" with a touch of professional enthusiasm which the lawyer could hardly be expected to appreciate at its full value. "One

"I'd feel most proud of, if I'd been fortunate enough to have performed the work!"

Eustace Reeves found it considerable of a task to hold full control over his tones, just then, but he was playing a doubly dangerous game, as he very well knew, and that fact went far toward helping him out.

"Have you forgotten a request which I made of you, when here, yesterday forenoon, doctor?" he asked, slowly.

"Of course not, my friend. You wished to be present at any operation which might be performed upon this fellow. Why, my dear sir!" all at once seeing that something surely had gone wrong. "Do you mean to tell me that you wasn't here, then?"

"I was not here, then. I did not know any such operation was about to be performed," came the rather testy reply. "Surely you ought to know that I was not here, doctor!"

The house-surgeon gave an impatient gesture, and his face showed strong annoyance in a dark frown.

Why not, when so much depended upon keeping in the good books of this influential gentleman?

"I left distinct orders that word should be sent you, in case you still wished to be a witness, Mr. Reeves. Am I to understand that you failed to receive this notification?"

"I most assuredly received no such word, doctor. Then the operation has already been performed?" his dark eyes bending keenly upon that pale face lying so quietly against yonder pillow.

"It was performed last night, as the one hope for his life," came the grave response. "I was not present, else I certainly would have delayed matters long enough to send another message to your house."

"Who did have charge, please?"

"Dr. Jarley. I would have claimed my rights, of course, only a very pressing message called me away, yesterday afternoon, and as there came a change for the worse, during my absence, Jarley assumed the responsibility. Still, I of course supposed he had complied with my positive request that notification should be sent you, in ample time."

The face of the surgeon showed a touch of injured dignity, as well, but for once Eustace Reeves played the rôle of peacemaker.

"Let it pass, I beg of you, doctor. Of course, I'd like to have been here, if only to give the poor fellow my assurance—"

"Oh, if that is all, you've really missed nothing," interposed the surgeon, with a distinct air of relief in both tones and upon face. "I made very minute inquiries on my return, this morning early, and I can assure you that the patient never fairly regained his consciousness, either before or after his skull was trephined."

This was the point at which Eustace Reeves had been cautiously aiming from the very start, and only his own excess of craftiness kept that knowledge so long away from him.

He knew that, once Jockey Jem Cross could recall his present, he would none the less certainly recall his past. And, if he so much as suspected the false account given the authorities by his assailant, he surely would play for revenge.

True, his unsupported word would have little weight against that of Eustace Reeves, but—might he not give facts and figures enough in fierce hatred to give sore trouble in the time to come, if not immediately?

All of this was surging through that busy brain, but on the surface Eustace Reeves showed only the gentle solicitude of a genuine humanitarian.

"His condition grew worse, you say, doctor?" he asked, after that brief silence. "Was he delirious, do you know?"

"Somewhat, no doubt. Indeed, he showed signs of this even before I was summoned away, which was one reason why I took the precaution to leave a written note to be sent you in case an operation should be deemed necessary during my temporary absence. How that could have miscarried, I can't imagine!"

"Let it pass, I beg of you, my good friend," quietly said Reeves, one hand slipping into his bosom, where his fingers closed upon a small capsule containing a glass-like white powder. "One point which has troubled me seriously, is this: what if my unfortunate blow has fallen upon the innocent as well as the guilty? What if a wife and tender children are solely dependent upon this man, for the necessities of life?"

"To solve this haunting doubt, if possible, was my main reason for wishing to be informed of any change in his condition without delay. You heard nothing on this point, when his ravings were spoken of, then?"

"Nothing of that sort was mentioned, simply because nothing of the kind took place," came the prompt assurance. "The patient let drop nothing by which even the faintest clew to his former life could be gathered."

Eustace Reeves inhaled a long breath, but it could hardly have been one of relief, else his face would have shown brighter.

He was just saying something about applying to the police for the desired information, when a call came for the house-surgeon.

"Don't let me detain you, doctor," the lawyer said, hastily. "I will be going in a minute, but—it's hard to leave the poor fellow, and know that all this suffering is the work of my own rash actions!"

Eustace Reeves bent a little further over that cot and its dead-alive burden, and as the surgeon hurried off in response to that summons, he carried with him a much higher estimate of the lawyer and real-estate agent than he had before entertained.

"A mighty good-hearted fellow, that's certain!" he commented. "To hear him talk, and see his pale face, one would almost believe he was sorry that brute hadn't cracked his skull, instead!"

Was this an accurate estimate, though? Hardly, else why did Eustace Reeves steal such a sly, crafty glance around him before drawing forth that capsule with its pinch of white powder?

Why did he move so as to have the cover of his back as a shield, cutting off the new nurse's view of the little stand where rested the medicine bottles and glasses used for Jockey Jem Cross?

With steady sleight the top of that capsule was removed, and the pinch of white powder dropped most deftly into the potion which was already measured out for the injured burglar!

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

THE instant this action was performed, Eustace Reeves stole another swift yet seemingly innocent glance around the place.

No one was watching his movements. Only the patients were near, with the single exception of the new nurse; and he was bending over a sick-cot, his back turned in that direction.

A grim, fierce smile flashed across that dark, smooth-shaven face, for Eustace Reeves felt assured his mission was accomplished.

The potion which would soon be given to Jockey Jem Cross showed no signs of being tampered with. Its color was partial security against that, and it would not take long for that pinch of white powder to become thoroughly blended with the liquid.

Then, if discovery should come later, what harm could befall him? If suspicion turned in any direction, would it not be toward the hospital dispensary?

"Only another unfortunate mistake!" murmured the lawyer, below his breath, as he cast a parting glance upon that pale face against the pillow. "Only a mistake, and—no word of it will ever pass beyond these walls, either!"

For a brief space he hesitated, looking toward the nurse. Would it be advisable to speak a word or two with him before leaving? To beg him to bestow extra care upon this poor unfortunate, for instance, backing the request up with a bank-note?

If the nurse had been paying any attention in that quarter, possibly Mr. Reeves might have made some such investment; but the contrary seemed to be the case, and so he turned away, just that much the richer.

"Let sleeping dogs lie, is a mighty good motto in a case like this, and so—good-morning to you, my honest blackmailer!"

Eustace Reeves passed out of the hospital without interruption, for which he was appropriately thankful. And as he struck the pave, that dark, grim smile came back to his face, and he muttered:

"That disposes of him, now for the Old Cat!"

Reaching the corner, the lawyer caught sight of an empty cab, and this promptly answered his signal. He entered, gave the driver a direction, then settled comfortably back among the cushions, giving himself up to busy thought.

That these were of a complicated nature, his altering face bore ample evidence, but the bright appeared to predominate, for his smiles came more frequently than his frowns.

It was not often that Eustace Reeves permitted his mask to fall so completely, but he was beyond observation, and he had been kept under such a severe strain for so many hours of late, that some such mental and facial relaxation had grown absolutely necessary.

One of his worst fears had proven without foundation: Jockey Jem Cross had not yet spoken the true story of his mishap!

"Nor will he, now! Good-by, old fellow! I would have made far better use of you than this, if you hadn't tried to mount the saddle in place of holding my stirrup, as I wished!"

And yet—even this had its darker side. What of the girl he had engaged this English crook to discover for him?

In due course of time the cab drew up in front of the residence to which Eustace Reeves had hastened only a short time after so summarily silencing Jem Cross, and discharging the cab, he leisurely approached the front door, rung, and was admitted by the servant on duty, who evidently looked upon him as something of a privileged character, since that admittance was granted without question being put or given.

Eustace Reeves at once proceeded to the draw-

ing room in which he had waited for the coming of Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux on that night, but now it was the lady who had been waiting impatiently.

"At last, man! I thought you were never coming!" Mrs. Devereux exclaimed, her usually musical voice sounding almost harsh with irritable suspense.

"You hold receptions earlier than usual, my lady," retorted Reeves, sinking into an easy-chair with more thought of comfort than the conveniences. "Now, I thought I was coming at a most unconscionable hour!"

"What is it, man?" leaning forward in her chair, speaking rapidly, her dark eyes fairly glittering. "How about that miserable wretch? Has he found out anything about that girl, as yet?"

Eustace Reeves gave a low, half-mocking laugh before replying:

"By miserable wretch you allude to Jockey Jem Cross, possibly?"

"What matter the name? I mean the person you said you had set upon the track of that girl! He has found her, then?"

"Do you remember my speaking of a burglar whom I caught in the act of robbing my safe, Mrs. Devereux?"

"Yes. I saw something of the affair in the papers, but—what?" as something of the truth seemed to burst upon her, just then. "What name did you mention, just now?"

"Jockey Jem Cross."

"The same name, surely! Reeves, have you been playing me false, all the way through? Was it all lies you told me, that night, about—"

"Not lies, my dear woman, but simply ornamented truth," came the cool retort. "My burglar happened to be the same individual who produced that written statement, signed by Farquhar Beresford, Lord Lechmere, that is all."

The woman's face grew perceptibly paler, despite the liberal coating of cosmetics which she saw fit to use. She could hardly doubt that this, the man whom she had calculated upon bending wholly and solely to her own ends, had been playing a bold hand of his own.

Just how far had he been false? How far would his treachery extend, and how seriously would it endanger the bold plans she had formed for the future?

All this required time for thought, but Eustace Reeves did not care to cut those swift reflections short. If correct, her forming them would save him just that much explanation. If wrong, he would be able to set her aright in good time.

So he sat there in lazy comfort, smiling maliciously as he watched the workings of that still remarkably beautiful face.

Then, by an effort which ought to have warned the lawyer he was playing with fire, Mrs. Devereux broke that silence, with the words:

"Just how much of truth was there in the newspaper account which I read, Mr. Reeves?"

"Anent the attempted burglary of my house, do you mean, Gwendolyn?"

"Concerning that affair, of course. Was it all lies, then?"

"Not all of it, my dear woman. There was a fellow carried out from my place, with a badly-wrecked skull, for one thing."

"Hurt by your hands, of course?"

"Well, yes. A gentleman has full right to defend his property, I believe, even to the extent of taking human life: provided these low brutes may be termed human, that is."

"The paper said there was one chance in a hundred that the injured burglar would recover: was that true?"

"Well, I really think that was giving the fellow full benefit of a doubt, so to speak. I just came from the hospital, before calling here, and—"

Then that forced composure gave way, and Mrs. Devereux cried out:

"You saw him? What had he to say? Did he give you the clew to that girl? Speak, man, can't you?"

"As soon as your musical voice grants me room sufficient, perhaps I might make the effort, at least," with a malicious chuckle.

Mrs. Devereux flushed warmly, but contented herself with making an impatient gesture.

"Well, since you are in such terrible earnest, my dear, I'll say just this much: I have serious doubts as to Jockey Jem Cross ever recovering his senses sufficiently to speak even one single word!"

"Lucky for you and your reputation for veracity, no doubt!" came sharply from those crimson lips.

"Even if he should let drop nothing concerning Giulia Raimando, and her truly romantic career on the other side of the water, eh?" the lawyer made retort, showing his strong white teeth in an evil smile.

A strong white hand flew up to a stormily heaving bosom, and her voice sounded harshly strained as the words came forth:

"You cur! Dare you taunt me with that?"

Eustace Reeves drew himself up erect in his chair, like one who deems it only wise to be ready for swift action. No doubt he knew pretty well of what this woman was capable when fairly aroused, yet he was more than will-

ing to dare her rage, and to irritate her still more fiercely.

This was the first time he had fairly let his mask drop, which may account in part for the angry amazement with which Mrs. Devereux now regarded him, usually so polite, so suave, so desirous to please and conciliate!

"Yes, my dear woman, I dare any and all things toward one whom I have good reason to believe my secret enemy."

Mrs. Devereux paled perceptibly at this pointed hint, but her voice came under better control as she made reply:

"Am I an enemy, then, Mr. Reeves?"

"A very lovely one, if so, my dear," bowed the lawyer. "Do we not term the blazing sun an enemy when we are exposed to its full rays in mid-summer, though? Still, who would be without it, for all that?"

For once in her lifetime this woman shrunk away from flattery. She made a gesture of aversion, yet there came a pained expression into her face.

For good and sufficient reasons she was strongly averse to breaking off all connection with this man. She knew him, up to date, as a shrewd, plausible, valuable aid, and really did not see how she was to manage her plots successfully without him now.

But—after the words he had just spoken and the manner in which he had acted, could she trust him further? Would she not be in greater peril with him as a false ally than as an open enemy?

All this flashed swiftly through the woman's mind during those few moments of seemingly pained silence. Then she spoke again:

"I wish I knew just how to take you, Reeves! Sometimes I can't help fearing you are actually playing me false, even while pretending to be my faithful coadjutor!"

"When in doubt, play trumps, Hoyle advises, my dear!" murmured the lawyer, his lids partly closing, his thin lips curling in a smile.

"What are you playing, then?" flashed the woman, almost fiercely. "Are you playing trumps against me, while all the time pretending to be upon my side? If so—"

"If so, what would you be tempted to do, Gwendolyn?" drawlingly asked Reeves, then adding, in sharp, sneering tones: "Knife me, as you did Lord Lechmere, and, later on, your adorable digger, Austin McRustie!"

Mrs. Devereux sat like one petrified for a brief space, but then, with a low cry, she snatched a gleaming dagger from out her corsage!

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLAWS AND CLOVEN HOOF.

"YOU devil! dare you speak such words to me?" cried Mrs. Devereux, leaning forward in her chair, until she reminded one of an angry panther crouching for its leap.

Few men would have cared to tempt that fury, even without knowing aught of her past record. There was death in her gleaming eyes, and something in the grip of that slightly quivering blade which told of long familiarity with the weapon's use.

But Eustace Reeves proved himself one of those rare exceptions, and without springing from his chair, or taking further precautions against a tigerish leap than to lift a warning finger, he spoke:

"Carefully, my dear child, for I've not got Lord Lechmere's statement with me, just now!"

Mrs. Devereux shrank back as though dealt a stunning blow fairly in the face. She turned paler, and her armed right hand sunk down to her lap.

The lawyer showed his teeth in a malicious smile as he noted all this. It was a sudden transition, but knowing the woman so thoroughly, he knew that it was genuine, not a mere mask for a more deadly retort.

"What do you mean?" huskily demanded the woman, making a strong fight for composure.

"What do I mean?" echoed Eustace Reeves, leaning forward in his turn, and showing a bit more of his indomitable will in the steady glow of his dark eyes. "For one thing, madam, that I am no purblind fool, to undervalue an enemy, simply because she belongs to what is termed the weaker sex.

"I came here to-day, thinking it best to reach a certain understanding with you, madam; but at the same time I was not above taking a few ordinary precautions to guard against ugly accidents."

"I don't understand you, sir!"

"Perhaps you may, before we part, Gwendolyn. As a start, let me repeat: I have not Lord Lechmere's statement upon my person. I have made such disposal of it that in case of serious accident happening to me, that statement will be published in a dozen prominent papers, with names, dates and photographs."

Eustace Reeves made this statement with clear tones, and almost painfully precise pronunciation. If he was not telling the plain truth, then his substitution was quite a work of art, for it surely carried full conviction to his single auditor.

Mrs. Devereux, for once, seemed to acknowled-

ge the presence of a master, although as yet her submission was merely involuntary. She shrank perceptibly, and those fingers slackened their grip upon the silver hilt of her weapon as it rested in her lap.

"Are you truly a devil?" she huskily asked, though the words escaped almost without her will.

"Not exactly, my dear woman, but I think I can safely say I'm dealing with one of his especial pets, if not his favorite disciple!"

There was just sufficient truth in this taunt to make its sting acutely felt, yet it served to nerve rather than still further shake the will-power of the woman whom Eustace Reeves had deliberately invited to a pitched battle.

The color came back to her cheeks, and her red lips curled with scorn quite as much as with anger. She began toying with the dagger whose keen point now and again dented the tip of her white fingers as they in turn carelessly tested its temper.

For the space of nearly a minute Mrs. Devereux sat gazing at the lawyer, her dark eyes slowly passing from face to figure, then reversing that process. She seemed trying to solve some difficult problem, and finally admitted as much, by ejaculating:

"What in the name of all wonders, Eustace Reeves, has come over you? What has worked such a startling change, since you were here last?"

"You really find me altered, then, Gwendolyn?"

"Do I not? So entirely altered that I fail to recognize the man in whom I placed my strongest trust! So utterly changed that I seem to recognize in his place a deadly enemy!"

"That surely is not so, my friend?" her tones growing softer, more musical, her hand deftly slipping the glittering weapon back into its warm concealment. "I will not have to fight you, with other enemies? You are still what I believed until this hour: true, sincere, whole-hearted in your friendship to the poor woman who trusted you with her long-cherished secrets?"

Eustace Reeves sat listening with a quiet smile upon his face, making no attempt to cut that speech short, although he must have seen Mrs. Devereux rather expected such an intervention.

The length of her speech plainly proved so much. Had she been more completely mistress of herself, words would have been fewer, actions more prompt; but, once having begun, she found a difficulty in stopping.

This was a symptom of weakness which Eustace Reeves could not only interpret, but could thoroughly enjoy, coming as it did from one whom he had good reasons for considering a most dangerous adversary.

Still, this welcome discovery made no material change in his plans. They had been pretty well elaborated before he paid that visit, and he stuck close to the line laid out by himself in advance.

"Well, my dear woman," he began, in reply. "Of course no transformation would be made unless for a sufficient reason. Mine runs along something like this:

"You gave me a glimpse at a possible stake. I looked more deeply into the matter, and came to the conclusion that it was well worth developing."

"I paid you for—"

"Patience, my dear child," interrupted the lawyer, with open insolence in face as in voice. "I'm talking, you will observe. Take your turn at listening, please!"

"Go on—you brute!"

Reeves smiled audibly at that. There was such an amusing contrast between those two parts; the first pair of words almost meek, the other couple full of intense hatred and fierce scorn.

"Thanks, for both permission and complimentary term," the lawyer said, with a bow toward his adversary. "I will go on, since my main object in calling this morning was to reach a thorough understanding with Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux."

Eustace Reeves paused, as though to invite a reply of some sort, but the lady named was rapidly collecting her mental forces for the battle which she saw must surely be waged ere long, and would not tempt defeat through too hasty action.

This, too, the lawyer was sufficiently keen to surmise, but his smile showed full confidence in himself and in the ultimate outcome.

"Very well, my lady! Since you prefer listening to talking, I'll make a clean sweep of my side of the question. Nothing like getting down to sober business, is there?"

"As I started to say, I concluded that there was an opening quite promising enough for a gentleman of my natural abilities, right where you let the curtain fall a bit further than you intended, perhaps."

"I was a fool for trusting you at all!" bitterly muttered the woman, with a flash of ominous fire in her black eyes.

"Far be it from me to contradict a lady," bowing with mock politeness as those words passed his lips. "An uncouth term, to be sure, yet she who made the selection surely

ought to be the best judge as to its correctly expressing her sentiments!"

Another stinging gibe, but once more it failed of its object. If anything, it warned Mrs. Devereux to close her guard still more snugly.

Eustace Reeves saw something of this effect, and his manner grew more grave, just as his tones took on a colder, harder note.

"Of course you know to what I allude, Mrs. Devereux, but since you requested a full explanation, so let it be!

"I learned of a vast fortune and a great estate, both awaiting a legal claimant, although it seemed as though heaven and earth was being overturned in the search for such an one.

"I learned, too, that a modest competence was ready for the lucky one who should produce that long-lost heiress, and after taking a fair length of time to weigh the matter, viewing it from all sides, I came to the conclusion that I might as well be that fortunate finder as any other less meritorious individual!"

"You tell me this?" demanded Mrs. Devereux, with difficulty holding her fierce passions in check the while. "You have the unblushing impudence to admit your willingness to betray my confidence, after taking such a solemn oath to serve me, and me alone?"

"There are oaths, and oaths, my dear madam," came the provoking reply. "It is one thing to stand firm against such temptation as presented by a monetary reward, no matter how dazzling that may be, but—"

"Yet are you not admitting your yielding to just such a temptation, you conscienceless scoundrel?"

"Touch lightly, I beg of you, my dear woman," coolly spoke the lawyer, with a lazy wave of his hand. "If you could only bridle that unruly member of yours for a few moments long, you might have spared yourself just so much wear and tear of the vocal organs.

"As I was about to state, it is one thing to pick up a reward, be that big or little, but how much more satisfactory would it be if a gentleman could only secure that (if only by saving it to the estate, you understand), but at the same time install his blushing bride as the long-lost heiress?"

Mrs. Devereux had tried to school herself to what was coming, but this was a step further than even she had expected Eustace Reeves to go. It sent a fierce glitter back to her eyes, but she contrived to, in some measure, hold her hot anger in check even now.

"Gladys never liked you, Mr. Reeves, even when you were at your best. She distrusted you even while you were playing spaniel before us both. For my sake, she endured your presence as my confidential man of business, but if you should dare even let drop a hint of such an intention—if you should dare approach her with an offer of marriage—she would both hate and loathe you!"

Eustace Reeves listened to this ominously deliberate speech with that sneering smile growing more and more pronounced upon his face.

He waited until Mrs. Devereux came to an end, then almost lazily spoke in his turn:

"Do you really think like that, my dear woman?"

"I not only think that way, sir, but I positively know it to be true."

"Then you must know the unknowable, my remarkable woman!" declared Reeves, straightening up in his chair, then adding in almost harsh tones. "You say no, but I say yes, Mrs. Devereux. Gladys will marry me at my first asking, or else—"

He paused, voluntarily, and after a brief pause, the woman asked:

"Or else—what?"

"Or else I'll marry the genuine lost baroness instead!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

METING HER MASTER.

ALTHOUGH she surely must have expected some such retort, the face of Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux grew paler than it had been since that remarkable interview began.

But she was still full of fight, and pluckily faced her dangerous adversary, sternly speaking in her turn:

"So that is your little game, is it, Eustace Reeves? Well, if you think to run in a false claimant for the Lechmere fortune—"

"I'd never think of doing just that, my dear, unless you make it richly worth my while," quickly interposed the lawyer, his eyes glowing like one who feels he need no longer maintain even the pretense of a mask, now matters had taken such a decided turn.

"You have said entirely too much, Reeves, not to say more. Please explain yourself, will you?"

"Willingly, Devereux! And to put it in a single breath, I'll tell you what is no news to you: Gladys is not the lost baroness!"

"She is! I swear it!" sharply cried his adversary, now flushed and strongly excited. "By all that's good, I swear Gladys is none other than Berenice Beresford, sole child and heiress to Lord Lechmere!"

"Wait a bit, if you please, my dear woman," coldly spoke the lawyer in his turn. "I repeat: Gladys is *not* the child who was stolen from Lechmere Hall on that night, now some seventeen years ago. She never will be accepted as such, either, unless she puts in her claim as my wife, bound as fast as law and gospel can tie that knot!"

"Are you turned lunatic, Eustace Reeves?"

"I flatter myself that I was never more wholly sane in all my life, Mrs. Devereux," came the cool retort. "But if by that question you wish to know just what I mean, here you can have it, without further disguise or beating round the bush."

"I mean, Mrs. Devereux, that you might have fared better in the end had you trusted your sworn agent fully, instead of trusting him only half-way, if indeed you placed even *that* amount of half-hearted confidence in him."

"I did trust you fully, sir, and *this* is the return you make!"

"You did not trust me, madam, and this is but the natural consequence of that *dis* trust," pointedly affirmed the lawyer, then adding swiftly: "As proof, let me tell you that I can prove the young lady you now call Gladys Devereux is really none other than the daughter of Austin McRustie, by his first wife!"

"A lie! A base falsehood, and you know as much, Eustace Reeves!"

"Will Austin McRustie say so, when I have placed him face to face with his stolen child?" sharply demanded the lawyer.

Mrs. Devereux had flinched perceptibly at the first mention of that name, and now she actually recoiled from before it. Her face was kept only from ghastly pallor by its coating of cosmetics, but her actual terror was still more perceptible in her dark eyes.

Eustace Reeves smiled sneeringly as he took note of this. He was more than satisfied with the effect his words had produced, and he counted his victory as good as won, even so soon.

But in this he was giving his adversary too little credit, as he quickly became aware.

Mrs. Devereux rallied with astonishing celerity, and made a fair effort to cover her momentary flinching at the same time, by saying:

"Surely you *are* turned crazy, sir! Back! come no nearer; else I'll summon the servants to my protection!"

"Admirably played, Gwendolyn, but it comes just a trifle late, don't you think?" retorted Reeves, showing no signs of the angry disappointment which he was really feeling at this sudden rally.

"What else can I think, sir, when you make such ridiculous statements? Gladys not the baroness? Oh, man, you are surely insane!"

"That is all right, my friend, but whether or no I prove my statement of plain facts, depends greatly upon what you say and do during the next few minutes. Will you back up my suit for the hand of the young lady you now call your daughter?"

"That would be of no use, even if I should, and you ought to know as much, Eustace Reeves."

"That is not an answer to the query I put: will you assist me in winning the adorable Gladys for a bride, please?"

"Why should I do that?"

"Well, for one reason, because you might easily do far worse."

His tones, more than his words, stung the woman to the very quick, and without replying more fully to his question, her hand again plucked forth that glittering blade from her bosom, her strong grasp causing the steel to quiver as she thrust it toward her enemy, her words coming with a sibilant hiss through her strong white teeth:

"You devil! Why don't I give you—*this*!"

She leaned quickly forward, bringing the blade downward with a vicious force, hardly two feet from that sneering visage.

But Eustace Reeves never flinched, never drew back nor stirred in his chair, his smile growing more pronounced as he gazed keenly into that rage-contorted face before him.

"Why, do you ask?" he spoke, coldly, yet contemptuously as it would seem. "Well, for one reason, I seriously doubt whether you would care to figure prominently in the public prints, just at this particular time of all others!"

The woman drew back to her former position, still nervously moving that weapon, but with a touch of admiration blending with her look of fierce hatred. More than the generality of her sex, perhaps, she could appreciate genuine nerve in a man.

And nerve Eustace Reeves certainly was displaying on this occasion, knowing her past record so thoroughly as he did.

"Shall I give you any further reason, Mrs. Devereux?" he asked, after a brief pause. "Or is this one sufficient?"

Once more the woman rallied, and smothering her vicious rage with a strong exercise of will, she asked with cold desperation in her face as it sounded in her voice:

"Must I fight you, Eustace Reeves? Will nothing less than a duel to the death suffice?"

"Well, if the choice is to be mine, Gwendolyn, I vote for peace," the lawyer said, in less irri-

tating tones. "A man would be a fool—or worse—to choose you for an open enemy, when he might just as well win you for an ally, stanch and true."

"Such as you have proven to me, is it?" with a sting in the query.

"I'll take sufficient precautions against anything like that, you can rest assured," with a soft chuckle. "It's not my way to plunge blind-fold into a matter, much less one where such a glorious prize is at stake. Whether you decide to help or to hinder, I'll know how to keep you well within the bounds of safety, be sure!"

This could hardly be called flattering, but Mrs. Devereux managed to swallow it for the present, until she could see a safer way out of the tangle into which she so unexpectedly found herself cast.

"I, too, prefer peace to war, unless you make the terms too outrageously intolerable, Reeves," she said. "Still, if I *have* to fight you, rest assured 'twill be a duel to the death!"

"So you hinted once before, Gwendolyn. Be original, can't you? Now, take this dagger business; that is old—a twice-told tale, to say the very least of it."

"Beware the third time, then, Eustace Reeves!"

"Is that an admission that I was correct in my allusion to Lord Lechmere and Austin McRustie, Mrs. Devereux?"

"I admit nothing, sir," with forced calmness. "The main question now is—what part do you expect to play in this game?"

"Merely a minor part, from now on," with provoking coolness. "As I stated in effect before, I am master now! What I say must be, shall be!"

"If you are wise enough to fall in with my plans, and will back me up in them from start to finish, well and good! You shall share in the fruits when I have fairly garnered the rich harvest. If not—well there is more than one way in which I can most effectually dispose of an unruly tool, my dear girl!"

Mrs. Devereux shivered perceptibly at this thinly veiled hint, and as she shrank further back into her chair, Eustace Reeves felt that he had indeed proclaimed his mastership.

"I know it comes hard to you, Gwendolyn, to find yourself thrust down from the premiership, so to speak, but I think I can do the subject far better justice as master than I could as simple agent.

"Still, I will not press you for a final decision, just at present. There is time enough and to spare. For two years the Lechmere fortune and title have been without an heiress, so far as the law could tell, and a few days more can make little difference."

"Gladys is that heiress, as I can make solemn oath, sir!"

"That would not be the first perjury placed upon record, my dear woman," coolly retorted the lawyer. "I don't know of another witness whom I would sooner trust to give such an oath full effect, but—why run that grave risk, when there is a perfectly safe course left open?"

"You mean—what is it you *do* mean, sir?"

"I mean that the real heiress is still living. I mean that the long lost baroness has been discovered by my agents, whom I set to work at your instigation, madam."

"But not—she is *his* child, not the lost baroness!"

"I remember you said something to that effect when you gave me the dim, distant clew which I followed up like a bloodhound. But—of course it would hardly do to say bluntly that a lady *lied*, would it?"

"I told you the truth, Eustace Reeves," declared Mrs. Devereux, with almost desperate composure. "I knew that Austin McRustie was vigorously searching for—for his daughter. For reasons which ought to be perfectly clear to you, I did not wish to come into open collision with him—least of all just now!"

"That part is clear enough, and so is the other, for that matter. I tell you, madam, your struggles are worse than vain! I tell you that I can place my hand upon the lost baroness at any given hour; but that girl is not what you say: the daughter of Austin McRustie!"

"She is—I swear it!"

"She is not—I make oath in turn. Gladys is Myrtle McRustie, but it rests almost entirely with you whether she ends her life as the child of the miner, or as that of Lord Lechmere.

"I love her: I have ardently loved her almost since our first meeting. I will make her my wife, and as such produce her as the lost baroness, if her claim is put forward at all."

"She will never consent to such an alliance, I repeat."

"Then I will set love aside and cling to simple fortune, with another bride to help console my heart," declared Reeves, rising from his chair and moving toward the door, then pausing for a final word:

"Think all this over, Mrs. Devereux, and I'll call again. But *my* wife shall claim both title and fortune: mind *that*, please!"

of the Holy Shepherd Hospital, he felt fairly well assured that not only had his secret mission there been accomplished, but that he need fear no after-clap.

Shrewd and far-sighted though the lawyer undeniably was in many respects, he had fallen into a dangerous error on this occasion, and could he have seen what happened in that same ward, only a few minutes after he so deftly emptied that capsule into the medicine standing near Jockey Jem's cot, he would have so realized, too!

What would have been difficult for him to believe, above all, perhaps, was that not a single one of his movements while near that cot had passed unobserved; yet such was an actual fact, and the new nurse, whose substitution for Nurse Morrison had been mentioned by the house-surgeon, was the person who took those notes.

Even while bending over another patient, with his broad back turned toward lawyer and victim, that observation was going on, thanks to an adroitly managed bit of mirror, the polished surface of which made as complete a tell-tale as the most ardent detective could have wished.

Scarcely had Eustace Reeves taken his departure from that ward than the nurse moved toward the cot on which the accused burglar was resting, and with one eye on guard against a possible return of the lawyer, he closely inspected the articles upon the stand.

"Did he do it, or was he only tempted? If so, there's but the one medium through which he could administer a drug of any sort!"

The nurse lifted the graduate containing that potion, holding it between his eye and the clear light, gently agitating the glass as he did so.

Was it anything more than a natural sediment thus set astir? Was that a portion of the regular prescription, rather?

While asking himself these questions, the nurse assured himself that in no other shape could evil have been worked, so far as the patient was concerned; and concealing that graduate in his hand, he moved lightly away from his post, going directly to the room where out-of-door employees changed their dress for the hospital uniform before beginning their regular hours of duty.

This change was quickly effected, and with his street-clothes, the nurse seemed to alter his facial features as well. It was merely a hospital nurse who entered that room, with a face containing more stolid good-nature than bright intelligence, perhaps; but it was a keen, vigilant, all alive detective who emerged in his place!

Gustave Lucksinger secured the graduate, tying a bit of gold-beater's skin over the top before setting forth. Then he held a very brief interview with Doctor Jarley, who seemed strongly impressed by the words given him in confidence.

Having by this means provided for a substitute to take his deserted position, German Gus left the hospital itself, striding briskly away like one who has important business on hand, or one who is in haste to keep a pressing appointment.

One hand kept careful guard over the graduate as it nestled in a side-pocket, and had any accident happened to that bit of frail glassware, Gustave Lucksinger would never have forgiven himself.

No accident did happen, however, and at length he drew forth the covered receptacle, holding it up before the grave eyes of a chemist to whom he had brought a letter of introduction when first reaching Chicago.

"A bit of work for you, Metsker," was his abrupt address, almost before the door had closed behind his back. "Can you analyze this without delay, my good friend?"

"For any particular ingredient, or do you wish for a complete analysis, Mr. Lucksinger?"

"I want to know whether or no there is any poison contained in the dose, to put it into brief words," replied the detective. "Can you do that? Off-hand, I mean! So that I will not have to lose important time!"

"That depends on the nature of the supposed poison, of course," the chemist answered, taking the graduate and holding it up between his eyes and the light coming through the unscreened window. "If any one of the commoner mineral—wait!"

His practiced eye likewise took note of that sediment, and removing the cap of skin, he tested the liquid with the tip of his tongue. Something akin to a sneer came into his pale face as he spat out the drop of stuff, and German Gus, who had been closely watching his actions, eagerly asked:

"You have found it already, Metsker? There is poison? You can name the sort, even?"

"I might make a guess, just as you have done, Mr. Lucksinger, but that would not be professional, nor is it a mere surmise which you desire, is it?"

"No. I want a regular analysis, set down in regular terms, and regularly attested by you, as a licensed chemist. Will you give me this, as quickly as may be consistent with thorough work, please?"

Mr. Metsker bowed assent and was soon at work. German Gus waited patiently for the result, which came in indisputable form: the liquid had certainly been tampered with, since

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GO LIGHTLY DETECTIVE AT WORK.

WHEN EUSTACE REEVES LEFT THE CASUALTY WARD

it contained rather more than a full-sized dose of strychnine.

With this statement put in due form, the Go-lightly Detective paid the chemist's bill, then hurried off to seek an interview with the then chief of police.

This interview was obtained with little trouble, for an understanding had long since been arrived at between the two worthies, and even before Lucksinger could communicate his latest discovery the chief read a part of the truth in his glowing eyes, and interestedly cried:

"You've struck oil again, Lucksinger? Which one of your snares has done the work *this* time, man?"

"The one laid at the Holy Shepherd, sir," came the instant reply.

German Gus knew that he could place implicit confidence in the chief, who had not only promised to lend him all possible assistance in his work, but to let the Go-lightly Detective carry on the campaign according to his own ideas as to what was wisest.

"That's where Jockey Jem, the English crook is, eh? And the game you have trapped? One of his pals, no doubt?"

"Well, I'm not so certain it should be called a *pal*," with a fleeting smile. "It certainly was not a *friend*, at present," and then he placed the certificate of analysis before the officer.

"Strychnine, eh? What intended for?"

"For Jockey Jem, and slipped into his medicine by the pal you just now spoke of, sir," quietly answered the Go-lightly Detective. "If necessary, I can make oath to all this."

"If necessary?" slowly repeated the chief, gazing curiously into that comely face for a brief space before adding: "That almost follows as a matter of course, I should say! But first—who do you want arrested for this bit of work, Lucksinger?"

"No one, at present. There's big game and bigger stakes in it, sir, and any too sudden move may spoil the round-up, as you Americans call a clean haul. I ask your further trust for a few days; I don't think it will take much longer than that to get at the bottom facts."

"What I wish done right away is this: remove Jockey Jem Cross from the Holy Shepherd Hospital, without saying whither you mean to convey him. You can do this, of course?"

"I can, but is it strictly necessary? Remember, the fellow is hardly fit for such a removal, though!"

"Would he be more fit if he had swallowed that quantity of strychnine?" tapping the chemist's report with a swift finger. "I was able to checkmate *this* move, but can I always be certain of such luck?"

The chief of police frowned a bit, and seemed considering the matter, but then German Gus added, half apologetically:

"I wish I could confide wholly in you, sir, but it does not seem best to me, as yet. Of course you shall come in before the grand round-up, but *until* then—will you not trust me, as you have so far done?"

"I just will!" with blunt emphasis. "You brought me a first-rate recommendation from Scotland Yard, and I'll see you through with this job, let it cost what it may! Where shall I remove Cross to?"

"That I leave entirely to you, simply suggesting that only men in whom you can place implicit trust be assigned as nurse and doctor."

This was promptly agreed to, and leaving the office, Lucksinger was loitering near the hospital when that removal was made.

There was nothing in his personal appearance to suggest the detective, and more than ever he seemed a youthful, unsophisticated fellow fresh from some rural region, leisurely "taking in the sights" of a great city, probably for the first time in his life.

Yet he was keen enough to notice a spy taking observations of that removal, and as the ambulance once more set in motion, the fellow started to follow after, doubtless with the hope of discovering whither the patient was being transferred.

Instead, the spy was confronted by a sturdy young fellow, who lightly tapped him on a shoulder, with the words:

"Don't be in such a rush, my good friend! I reckon I'll have to run you in, just for luck!"

"Arrest me!" ejaculated the amazed man.

"What have I done, now?"

CHAPTER XXX.

GO-LIGHTLY GUS TAKES A TUMBLE.

As he spoke, the fellow shrunk back, but before he could break from that touch, it became a firm grip instead.

German Gus saw how instinctively the spy's right hand moved toward his hip-pocket, and with a swift movement he himself secured the revolver which was hidden in that receptacle, at the same time making a threatening show of the gun as he added:

"Will you go on your own feet, or shall I call an ambulance?"

Quietly as these words were spoken, they clearly "meant business," and so the fellow evidently decided, since his incipient attempt to break away from that grip instantly ceased.

"Don't shoot, boss, for I'm a perfect lamb!" he huskily mumbled as an elbow partly lifted as a shield to his head at which that menacing muzzle was pointing just then.

"See that you don't force me to convert you into *mutton*, then," retorted German Gus, with a short chuckle, but lowering the weapon and slipping it into his side-pocket. "You are going with me, then?"

"Which way, boss?" meekly asked the cowed spy.

"My way, of course," and Lucksinger slipped his left hand through the spy's arm, moving leisurely off in the direction opposite that taken by the police ambulance.

All this had transpired so quickly, and at the same time so quietly, that no attention was drawn their way, although several persons were within easy eye-shot. Nor was any particular notice paid them as they moved away from in front of the hospital.

Why should there be?

The detective was in plain clothes, and looked anything rather than an officer of the law making an arrest.

The spy was far less at ease, although he also strove to conceal the fact of that arrest; but his face did not betray agitation sufficient to attract attention from strangers, whatever might have been the case had he met a friend who knew more of his every-day life.

The spy cast only one glance behind them, just in time to catch a last glimpse of the ambulance as it turned a corner. He knew now that he would be unable to perform the duty for which he was being paid, but that knowledge troubled him far less acutely than the doubt as to why he was being arrested.

"What have I done, boss, that you're nabbing me?" he ventured to ask, as Lucksinger guided him around the next corner. "Reckon you've made a mistake, and hit on the wrong man. Unless—This isn't a low-down joke, is it, though?" with a sudden suspicion coming into his mind.

"A joke, my good friend? Well, if you can make yourself believe it is a mere jest, so much the happier you!" coolly retorted the Go-lightly Detective.

"But, man, dear, I say I haven't done anything to deserve being pulled for!" protested the spy, with a fine show of injured honor. "I'm an honest, hard-working man, with a wife and family who'll suffer—You surely have struck the wrong fellow, boss!"

"Well, for your wife and family's sake I'm trying to hope that same way, but I'm not so dead sure—"

"Then you'll let me go, boss?" with poorly-masked eagerness, fancying he could detect a yielding which might be made complete by judicious pleading. "Of course I haven't done anything wrong, and I'd be turned loose as soon as any charge which you may make against me is looked into, but—think of the shame!"

"Wouldn't it have been more to the point if you had taken thought of all that, before doing the crooked job, though?" mildly suggested the detective, still leisurely plodding along with his unwilling companion.

"But, man alive! don't I tell you that I haven't been in any crooked business? That I'm as innocent as the babe unborn?"

"You are telling me just that, I'm free to admit, yes."

"Well, then? You'll not cast such foul disgrace upon an innocent man, I'm sure? You'll think better of it and—"

"I will, right gladly, on one condition," calmly interrupted German Gus, his face as grave as that of a carven statue.

"Name them! I'd do 'most anything rather than have my name put on the record—think of my wife and family, sir!"

"It's a very simple condition, too," musingly added Lucksinger.

"Name it, then! What condition do you impose?"

"Merely that you get the chief of police to go your bail as an honest citizen, my good friend; nothing more than that!"

A half-smothered curse came through those angrily clinching teeth, and the spy said no more, just then. He must have seen how vain was his hope of winning immunity from arrest by the cunning use of his glib tongue, and for a time he proceeded without word or resistance.

On his side, German Gus was perfectly willing to let that argument drop. For one thing, he had no actual charge to make against this fellow, having arrested him simply and purely because he instinctively divined the truth: that he had been placed near the hospital as a spy, either by Eustace Reeves, or friends to Jockey Jem Cross.

In either case, it could do no harm to "run him in," while it might do much good. By judicious "pinching," valuable information might be extracted from his lips, and at the very least, he would be prevented from tracking the injured Englishman to his new resting place.

These reflections were occurring to Lucksinger

during the next few minutes, and possibly had something to do with the events which were destined to follow.

His prisoner was going along so quietly that he had no cause for suspecting impending trouble, and so may have been the more readily caught off his guard when the time for action came.

For, in spite of that sullen submission, the spy was plotting for freedom, as well as bitter revenge upon the stranger who had arrested him so adroitly.

Only a few moments after the Go-lightly Detective named his "condition," the spy caught sight of a couple of his friends ahead, and as they looked his way, instantly recognizing a pal, his free hand made a covert but recognizable gesture to them.

That motion told the pair of thugs that their friend was in need of help, and another gesture, alike unseen by German Gus, told them plainer than words that he must be rescued at all risks!

When first sighted the two fellows were lounging in front of a saloon, but when that second gesture came, they moved away in the same direction Go-lightly Gus was conducting his prisoner, but betraying no signs of interest in him or his companion.

The spy stole a shy glance into that honest face beyond his shoulder, but he saw nothing there to indicate that the detective was catching on to his dangerous little scheme; and then he kept his head bowed, like one too angrily sullen for speech or aught else in which his tyrant could share, just then.

The two ruffians in advance were laughing and sky-larking with each other, this giving them a fair excuse for sending frequent glances backward, thus enabling them to measure their rate of progress by that of their pal and his captor, as well as to keep along his line of march.

Then, when nearly midway a block, seeing the detective coming that same way, the two thugs descended into a basement, the edge of the entrance being guarded merely by a low railing of wood, which had rotted under age and exposure to the elements.

As German Gus drew closer to this spot, his prisoner nerved himself for the desperate effort which he knew must be made then, if at all; and when the critical moment arrived—when they were exactly opposite that improvised man-trap, he flung himself fiercely against the detective, trying to hurl him headlong down the area, over the rotten railing!

For once in his life the Go-lightly detective was taken fairly off his guard, but even so, he was not so readily conquered, and as he was forced against the railing he grappled vigorously with his assailant, and almost surely would have subdued him, had not the rotten wood given way before the pressure, sending both men toppling headlong down toward the stone bottom where the armed thugs were lying in wait for their prey!

There was something catlike about the Go-lightly Detective, and this quality stood him in good stead in this emergency. The shock was a heavy one, but he received it mostly upon his muscular shoulders, while his prisoner fared even worse.

Rebounding as though made of india-rubber, German Gus was upon his feet before the ruffians could leap upon him, and, springing through the doorway at which they had fallen, Lucksinger snatched forth that confiscated revolver from his pocket, crying out, sternly:

"Back, ye devils! Back, or I'll lay ye out—cold!"

The thugs involuntarily recoiled, surprised in their turn, for they had not calculated upon such a marvelous recovery. Savage curses broke from their lips as they saw the detective was armed, but they were not so greatly daunted as to refrain from their deadly purpose.

"Steady, you curs! I've got you spotted, and I'll run you both in if you lift a finger this way. See?"

And he exhibited his detective star.

But then came a stir behind Lucksinger, and the thugs called out:

"Slug him, mate! Now—all in a bunch, and he's our meat!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

GERMAN GUS STILL ON TOP.

The Go-lightly Detective had not been given much chance for inspecting the quarters into which he so unexpectedly found himself cast, but he knew that the basement contained a "dive" of some description, in which liquor formed a part, as his nostrils plainly declared.

The single, swift leap had carried him fairly clear of the doorway, near which he had fallen, and while thus bringing the two thugs in his front, he necessarily turned his back toward whatever might be in the rear half of that dimly lighted apartment.

He had barely time for catching a glimpse of the fellow whom he had arrested while playing spy, crawling like one partly stunned, up the stone steps beyond; for noting the manner in which the thugs grasped their weapons and

gathered themselves for a swift assault; then his keen ears gave him warning of other occupants, even before that savage cry broke forth from his enemies in front.

It was his detective instinct which caused German Gus to leap swiftly to one side, ducking his head and humping his shoulders as a further guard against any blow which might be coming in that instant.

As he did this, he uttered a yell at the topmost pitch of his lungs, although he could hardly hope to spread an alarm before that affair was settled one way or the other.

"Down him!" howled the thugs, springing forward, only to be met by their intended victim with equal resolution.

German Gus barely escaped a vicious stroke from a "life-preserver" as he made that bound, and then his left arm shooting out, checked the rush of the dive-keeper for an instant, sending his bullet-head back with a force that made his neck give a snap like an overgrown elater beetle.

"Back, ye curs! Last warning, for—take it, then!"

"Crack! crack! went the confiscated pistol, and if the first shot missed its mark, the second did the work intended, and a howl of savage pain and fury came from one of the thugs as he reeled back, his right arm falling with shattered bone.

Only those two shots were discharged. The Go-lightly Detective could see but two enemies left in the ring, and he felt himself fully competent to cope with them on their own grounds.

Swiftly reversing his revolver, German Gus sprung forward, his left arm acting as shield and parry, his right arm dealing sturdy blows as near as possible where they would do the most good.

"Here I vhas, und more a-goming! Head vay 'oop, und dail a-climbing dot dasher oafers! Dot vhas vor you, und—"

So much of his excited dialect was given, but that was before issue was fairly joined, and the thugs were dodging his swift strokes and feints.

Then the pistol-butt was dashed with cutting force squarely into the center of one vicious face, knocking its owner dizzily back against his mate, throwing both into confusion. Then, with another shrill yell that rung far beyond those dingy confines, German Gus closed with the enemy, and a living mass fell to the floor in company.

It had been a hot, fierce brush while it lasted, but the work was pretty well done up before the hurrying policemen came tumbling down those stone steps with drawn clubs, attracted by those yells and the report of firearms.

They arrested the spy as he was staggering off in dizzy fashion, for his torn garments and bloody face rendered him an object of suspicion; but he seemed unable to answer their swift questions, and fearing murder would be completed if they delayed longer, the officers advanced at quick-step.

They could not make out just what lay ahead of them, at first, but before their eyes grew accustomed to that dim light, a voice came to their assistance:

"Schust in dime, shendleman! I vhas raken me in a bile off nasdiness, der bigness off—Keviet, you two-lecket shon-donkeys!"

There came the sounds of a brief struggle, ended by a heavy blow as of a clinched fist falling upon yielding flesh.

Then a man with helpless right arm tried to dodge past the policemen, but instead ran into a firm grasp and made speedy acquaintance with a heavy locust.

"What's going on here, and who—"

"Hello, Inglesant!" cried out German Gus, recognizing an acquaintance in the officer who began that sharp query. "Just in time to help me run these rascals in, old friend!"

"What! it's you, Lucksinger?"

"Just me, for these curs are hardly worth counting," came the cool response, and just then the officers grew sufficiently accustomed to that altered light to see what lay ahead of them.

The Go-lightly Detective had both his adversaries down, one lying across his mate, with the detective squatting as capsheaf, his doubled fist held warningly over their devoted persons!

It did not take long for a satisfactory explanation to be given, and then the four ruffians were marched through the streets under guard to the Central Station, where Gustave Lucksinger promptly entered complaints against them.

After this was done, and German Gus had a brief consultation with the officer in charge, he spent a few minutes in the cell to which the spy was consigned, testing an idea which he had early conceived.

"You're not nearly the fool your recent actions have seemed to prove, my good friend," was his beginning. "You have been working for wages, of course. You have no especial tie of friendship binding you to the person who gave you the job of playing spy. Now—wouldn't it be wiser in you to purchase immunity from prosecution for this assault upon an officer of the law, by talking just a little bit, than to invite even extra punishment?"

But the fellow was stubbornly silent. He had

been pretty badly bruised up by that fall in company with the detective whom he thought to hurl down to meet his death. He used this as an excuse for not talking.

German Gus was not deceived. He knew that each word spoken by him had been heard and understood. They might bear good fruit, although not immediately, and in that hope he let fall another hint:

"You can take your own time to think it over, just so you reach a decision before this time to-morrow. If you conclude to make a clean breast of it, all you need do is send in a call for Officer Frank Inglesant.

"I'll leave him as my deputy for this purpose, and whatever you may tell him, of the truth, will be just as effective as though you were making me your father confessor."

Lucksinger lingered a full minute, but the spy made no sign which could be accepted as a wish to confess. And then, with a light farewell, the Go-lightly Detective left the cell, spoke a few words in private with Officer Inglesant, then passed through to the street, heading once more for his chambers.

He had not passed wholly unscathed through that tumble and subsequent struggle against odds, although his clothes had fared the worst.

More than one curious, half-mocking glance followed German Gus during that brisk walk, but what cared he?

Taken all-in-all, he had done rather more than a good day's work since donning his hospital suit that morning.

For one thing, he had fully confirmed the suspicions which the words and looks of Eustace Reeves had aroused on that first visit to the injured man whom he had charged with burglary.

Jockey Jem Cross surely knew too much concerning this lawyer to be let take his natural chances, it seemed. What could he know, though, that was sufficient to justify so bold an attempt at murder?

"Whatever he knows, that same I'll know, if ever Jockey Jem recovers his senses sufficiently to talk, or to hear plain truths," German Gus congratulated himself, as he reflected how adroitly that removal of the injured man had been effected. "Then—if my friend, the spy, will only learn the full use of his tongue!"

Taking it all together, Gustave Lucksinger had pretty fair excuse for his general light-heartedness when, entering his lodging-house, he ran with boyish pace up the stairs, bursting into his room—to stop quickly at the sight which greeted him.

The room was fairly blue with smoke, out of which came the eager face of Austin McRustie, with the hasty greeting:

"Good Lord, pardner! I began to think you'd never show up again!"

"I'd have hurried my coming, good friend, could I have guessed what a treat I was missing," politely declared Lucksinger, at the same time bowing toward that second figure. "It is very welcome you are, my dear sir, and likewise your friend, Mr. —"

"Jack Hardress—know him, Lucksinger," with a wave of his hand by way of completing that introduction. "Gent I used to know in the old mining days, and one who has brought me great news—grand news, I'm telling you, pardner!"

"It needs not that to make you heartily welcome, my very dear sir," blandly declared the Go-lightly Detective, stepping forward to clasp the hand of—Dick Ashton.

"Well, why don't you ask—oh, confound you for a cool hand, pardner!" exploded McRustie. "He's brought me word where she lives!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRYING TO HELP HIS PAL.

THIS was rather better word than German Gus expected, although he entertained just an inkling of the truth, too, since he believed he recognized that still discolored optic.

But he was far from feeling satisfied with his impulsive employer, and a shadow of a frown came over his face as his eyes swiftly roved from one face to the other.

"Why don't you say something, man alive?" demanded McRustie, with still further evidence as to his feverish excitement. "He's found out where that woman lives when she's to home, and now—Can't we go look for my little girl, right off the handle?"

Dick Ashton was plainly nervous under that searching gaze, fidgeting with feet and fingers, then bluntly breaking out with:

"It's a dead straight deal, this time, boss, but before I talk any more, I wish you'd just let me ask one question?"

"What question is that, sir?" coldly spoke the detective, his manner and tones both altering decidedly.

"About Jockey Jem Cross. They wouldn't let me in to see him, when I tried, but—he's going to pull through, sir?"

"First, just what is Jockey Jem Cross to you, sir?"

Ashton hesitated for a brief space, then forced his eyes to meet that keen gaze while making answer:

"Well, sir, I'll be honest with you. I know

that Jem has been a bit off-color, of late. I know he's done some things a bit crooked. But, for all that, time was when he showed himself a mighty good friend to me, and so—I'd like to get a good word, don't you see, sir?"

It was not a very brilliant speech, perhaps, but Dick Ashton was in a rather embarrassing situation just then.

For one thing, he had not expected his friend's friend to take just this shape, else he certainly would never have waited for that arrival.

He recognized the Go-lightly Detective, and while they had never come into actual contact, save on that night when Austin McRustie was assaulted, he knew German Gus by reputation through the chatter of his recent associates.

McRustie was about to speak, but a gesture from Lucksinger silenced him for the time being. Then German Gus spoke again:

"You admit, then, that your friend had lived on the cross, sir?"

"If he has, 'twas mainly because he was egged on by far worse men, sir!" eagerly asserted Ashton.

"By which you mean—just what, my good friend?"

Again there was a perceptible faltering, but of brief duration. Ashton had resolved to serve his pal if that service lay in his power, and so he finally blurted forth:

"What if I tell you all about that attack on Aus. McRustie here?"

The ghost of a smile flitted about that grave face, then the Go-lightly Detective spoke in his turn:

"How much can you tell me that I do not already know, sir? To give you an inkling, listen: I already know that Jockey Jem Cross, Frank Mason and Tony Keppler were among that gang. There was a fourth member to complete the roster, but—perhaps you would rather I stopped right where I am?"

Dick Ashton flushed hotly, then turned pale, again, but he showed no further signs of fear or of flinching, firmly facing the detective as he replied:

"I was the fourth member, Mr. Lucksinger, and I got this black eye while trying to carry out orders. But—whose money was it that paid us for downing the sport?"

Austin McRustie had been holding in through this interchange, but he could do so no longer. His face was stern-set, his voice stern almost to grimness as he cried out:

"The woman you thought I was living with in such peaceful bliss and unadulterated happiness, of course, Jack Hardress!"

Dick Ashton looked that way, a puzzled look coming into his face, but he shook his head in negation.

"No woman put up the scads, pardner, that I can make oath to. The one who wanted you downed—who was willing to pay over big money if you were put to sleep for all time—was none other than the same devil who smashed Jem's skull, that same night, later on!"

It was McRustie's turn to exhibit surprise, for until this moment his old acquaintance had religiously kept that secret to himself.

German Gus, likewise, was taken a bit aback by this positive statement, for he, too, had attributed that assault to the woman of the thumbless hand; but he was quick to see a possible advantage in all this, and instantly set about improving it.

"Surely there is a more comfortable method of transacting business than this, my good friends," he cried, with a return of his customary cheerful lightness of speech and manner. "Allow me, as host: be seated, please!"

He hustled about, placing chairs near the little table, upon which he deposited materials for drinking and smoking.

Austin McRustie showed some signs of mutiny, through his feverish anxiety to lose no further time in seeking out his stolen daughter; but a sign given by the detective from behind Dick Ashton enforced compliance for the time being.

When once seated in seeming comfort, German Gus reopened that interesting subject, speaking with mild gravity:

"Plain words are best, I think, gentlemen. So much has already been said that we can hardly afford to keep up a useless disguise. Am I not right in this, Mr. Hardress?"

"I reckon you are, sir, although—I'm not denying that I've been playing dirt, of late days, but that's no reason why I should hang back and let the worst devil of all rake down his winnings, is it?"

"Well, hardly! And now, I'll be just as plain-spoken as yourself, Mr. Hardress. If you have gone astray a bit—"

"Pretty widely, I reckon fits it better, sir," with a faint smile.

"It is pretty much the same, my good friend, provided you are willing to make what amends lies in your power. As for the part you took in that little affair, the other night, I'm confident Mr. McRustie will never think of pressing it against you. Is it so, my friend?"

"I've forgotten that long ago," came the instant response.

"And if there should happen to be anything else—which I'm not saying there is, you'll ob-

serve, Mr. Hardress—I'll go bail there will be no serious trouble, provided—”

“It isn't myself I'm worrying so much about, boss, as poor Jem,” interrupted Ashton. “Will he pull through, do you reckon?”

“There is a chance for his recovery, of course, but hardly of the best. If he dies, it ought to go hard with the man who injured him, unless, of course, he does so while legally defending his property.”

“I'll never believe that, though Reeves swore it on a stack of Bibles reaching from here to the moon! It was a put-up job on Jem, and I'll never think any other way.”

This was the point toward which the Go-lightly Detective was leading, and he quietly asked:

“Why do you think Mr. Reeves downed your friend, then? Was it to cheat him out of the reward promised in case he slugged McRustie?”

“Worse than that—a good deal worse than that!” fiercely asserted the seedy-looking sport, either falling blindly into the trap or else caring for nothing more than to avenge his pal upon the man who had battered him up so savagely.

“How, worse?” blandly asked German Gus, giving the impatient mine-owner a warning kick beneath the table.

“Well, I can't tell you exactly,” said Ashton, his manner moderating somewhat, but with no loss of resolution. “But I do know this much: Jem Cross had a strong hold of some sort upon Eustace Reeves, and when he left me that night it was to pay Reeves a visit.”

“That is evident, from what occurred at his house. You surely know something about this hold? Did Cross give you no confidence, whatever?”

Ashton hesitated a brief space before replying, but when he spoke he made no mention of Maggie Lester. On that point his mind was not yet made up as to his wisest course of procedure.

“Jockey said he was after big money. He let a few hints drop, but I can't say justly that I fully understood what game he meant to play. But I do say this much: he went to keep an appointment, and certainly was not going to turn that into a burglary—now, was he, boss?”

“Hardly, unless he missed that appointment, and dropped in at the Reeves residence as a substitute. That is barely possible, you must see, Mr. Hardress.”

“Call me Dick Ashton, sir. I've disgraced that other name, and I'd rather not use it again until—”

“Until you've cleared the record, and that you'll do before you and I lose sight of each other, pardner!” declared McRustie, heartily clasping that reluctant hand.

“I'll do what I can, you may be sure, gentlemen, and as a starter in that direction I've told this bit of plain truth. I'm asking nothing for myself, you understand, but I would like to see this devil of a Reeves come up with! You'll see that the truth comes out, sir?”

“I'll do what lies in my power, yes. If Mr. Reeves has been in the wrong, be sure I'll fetch the truth to light. And now, I'll see you later, Mr. Ashton, when business is a little less pressing than right now.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CLAIMING HIS CHILD.

DICK ASHTON accepted his dismissal very meekly for a man of his naturally hot temper, and when Austin McRustie had exchanged a few words with him on the landing, the mine-owner returned to the room where German Gus was waiting.

There was a good deal to be said on both sides, before a complete understanding was finally arrived at; but the Go-lightly Detective had fairly taken the reins in his own hands, and was able to convince his somewhat mutinous client that he could best shape their course.

For his part, McRustie told the substance of what he knew about Dick Ashton, as Jack Hardress now preferred to be called, and after what manner he had managed to secure such important aid from that quarter.

“He's a good man gone wrong a bit, but I'll fetch him back to the middle of the road before I let him drop,” declared McRustie, with friendly decision. “I'll owe him so much, if only because of his fetching me this last bit of news.”

“Of the Madame's place of residence, you mean?”

“Sure! That, and the good word that my child, or a young lady who passes for her daughter, at least, is living there too. Now—can't we get a move on, pardner?”

“Of course, just as soon as it is prudent or safe.”

Then the mine-owner lost his forced composure, and “blew off steam with all valves wide open!”

German Gus calmly listened and waited until Austin McRustie paused for lack of breath, then coolly put in his answer.

“If we go now, we run the risk of finding the Madame out. If out, she may never be in, to us, since she surely knows you are in town and searching for her. She would rather take to flight than face you, just now. I'm pretty confident.”

“How much better off will we be through waiting, though?”

“For one thing, we can the more easily make sure the lady of the house is at home before seeking admittance. In fact, that is about all we really care for, isn't it?”

“The child—curse the woman, Madame or no Madame!”

Thereupon German Gus settled himself down to a sober talk, during the course of which he made revelations which caused his employer to open wide his eyes, and utter many a startled ejaculation.

Eager though he was to meet the daughter from whom he had been parted so long, Austin McRustie could understand now that there were other points to be considered, some of them of almost as great importance as that reunion of father and daughter, even in his estimation.

Gustave Lucksinger had considerable to look after before he could feel satisfied all his threads were in order, and by giving his impatient friend and employer one or two of these to look after, then inventing others which served just as good a purpose, he kept McRustie fairly well under control for the remainder of that day.

It was not until after supper that German Gus gave the word for setting forth upon their expedition in quest of the stolen child, nor would he give it then, until after Austin McRustie had solemnly promised to follow, not lead; to obediently accept whatever cue the Go-lightly Detective might see fit to give him, once an interview was secured with the woman whom both now firmly believed was she of the Thumbless Hand.

Both men were rather expecting some little difficulty in securing admission to the house, under the circumstances. If McRustie had made no error, and this “fair one of the golden locks” should indeed prove to be his recreant wife, she might have given strict orders concerning such admissions, through dread of her husband's finding out her place of abode.

“Of course I can open doors and trip bolts with *this*,” said German Gus, tapping a finger against his hidden shield of office. “But that I'd prefer avoiding, if possible. Still, be ready to back me up if any attempt is made to close the portal, after once it comes ajar!”

Of course it was well to have all these minor points understood in advance, but this proved to be breath spent in vain.

Lucksinger pulled the bell, and with very brief delay the door was opened, for Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux expected a caller that evening, and even then was impatiently listening for his signal.

“Mrs. Devereux?” suavely spoke the Go-lightly Detective, as he slipped through that opening with graceful ease, making his foothold perfectly sure, first thing. “We have an appointment, which—in yonder room, is it?”

Intuition blended with impudence, and once more German Gus won a valuable point by taking it all for granted. “Mrs. Devereux was in that apartment, and almost before the surprised servant was through making the admission, the two callers had passed on, and the smooth-tongued member was actually bowing to the lady of the house as his muscular frame half-filled the doorway.

Mrs. Devereux was eagerly gazing that way, but she failed to see the one she expected, and rose to her feet with a smothered exclamation which was not entirely free from anger.

German Gus, however, was convinced that no error rested on *his* side, and with a swift gesture to McRustie, he stepped inside the parlor, and waiting barely long for his companion to draw clear, closed the heavy door behind them both.

“Sir!” cried the woman, her dark eyes beginning to glow at this decidedly unceremonious proceeding. “How dare you—who are you?”

Lucksinger had an answer in waiting for just such a question as that, but before he could bring it to light, Austin McRustie broke bonds and entirely forgot the solemn pledge he had given, and so recently repeated!

Now that he stood face to face with this woman, not even her truly admirable make-up could deceive the eyes which had so often gazed in honest admiration upon her every feature. Love takes a strong impression, and in those days gone by he had loved her to distraction.

“Joe! Josey!” he huskily cried, reaching forth his hands as though to clasp her to his bosom. “Is it like *this* we meet, girl?”

Mrs. Devereux shrank away, but if she felt any stronger emotion than any woman naturally would at being addressed in such manner by an entire stranger, her still beautiful countenance did not betray it.

“I don't—who are you, sir? How dare you act like this? Surely you are mad!”

Austin McRustie recoiled almost as he might from a stunning blow full in the face. His face turned very pale, and seemed to grow years older in those half-score seconds.

German Gus came to the rescue at once, his tones clear but smooth.

“You ask who this gentleman is, madam, yet you surely have not forgotten him so entirely? Must I give you an introduction in due form to Austin McRustie, of Denver?”

“This is an unpardonable intrusion, sir,” haughtily retorted the woman, showing no signs

of fear or flinching now. “Will you take your departure in peace, or must I summon an officer to protect my privacy?”

“Have you any particular officer in view, madam?” coolly asked the Go-lightly Detective, at the same time turning back his coat far enough to permit a view of his badge. “Possibly I might serve your purpose?”

“Are you an officer, then?”

“You bet he is, Madame, and he'll run you in so mighty quick your head won't get through swimming for a month, too! Unless—Come down to bed-rock, Joe, old girl! Where's the little kid?”

Mrs. Devereux shrank away from the mine-owner, moving nearer German Gus, as though feeling instinctively that he would protect her even against this companion of his, in case of need.

“Who is he?” she breathed, barely above a whisper, her dark eyes seeming to grow larger with a blending of wonder, anger and suspense. “What does he mean by addressing me in such a strange manner? Surely he is not—not an escaped lunatic?”

It was a superb bit of acting, always taking it for granted she was indeed “the Madame,” and Lucksinger gave her full credit for it, too.

But Austin McRustie was not so impartial. His ears were keen enough to catch her words, and stung with rage he burst forth again:

“Who am I, is it? That's easy answered, Madame! I'm Aus. McRustie, the man who gave you his heart and all to play with! And now—I want my daughter! Give me back the child you robbed me of, or I'll—Don't make me say the words, or I'll be devilishly tempted to do, as well!”

Mrs. Devereux shrank a bit closer to the detective, but he fell away in turn, thinking that the right time had come for closing in, so far as that one point in the case was concerned.

“Better answer him, I think, madam,” he said, coldly. “Where is his daughter, now?”

“How should I know that? So far as I know, he has no daughter!”

Gustave laughed softly, for in those last words he caught a glimpse of claws. Woman-like, even the Madame could not refrain from wreaking at least a slight portion of her spite, even though it might easily endanger the rôle she had determined to play.

“I mean my girl, Myrtle, the child you carried off with you when you robbed me of my property, leaving me nothing in exchange, but *this!*”

As he spoke, Austin McRustie produced that velvet box, opening it to draw forth that artificial thumb, thrusting it almost into her face.

With a low, smothered cry, Mrs. Devereux shrank back.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PRESSED TO THE WALL.

As she did this, Mrs. Devereux instinctively moved a hand toward the detective as though seeking his support, and boldly improving the opportunity thus afforded him, German Gus caught her hand in his: *it was her left hand, too!*

With a sharp, yet half-smothered scream of rage and terror, the woman jerked free, but she left something behind her!

The Go-lightly Detective held up a second artificial thumb, and in his cool tones spoke quickly:

“I think *this* will help matters along a little more rapidly, my good friends! Mrs. Devereux will hardly deny longer that she was once the loved and loving wife of Austin McRustie!”

“You—you devils—both!”

“We are both ready to prove ourselves very human, madam, if you will only permit us that pleasure. It is for *you* to choose: peace or war? If the former, you surely have no objections to calling in the young lady known under this roof as Miss Gladys Devereux?”

“But who is my stolen child, Myrtle!” harshly broke in McRustie. “You daren't deny that, Joe, no more than you dare longer deny you are the woman I made my wife, believing her pure as an angel, perfect as—as I found she was false, in more than this!” at the same time holding up the artificial thumb, the mate to which German Gus now had.

A fierce, cruel smile briefly lighted up that painted face; and after a moment or two delay, Mrs. Devereux stepped across to the table, striking a silver bell sharply.

A servant came promptly to the door, and to her the lady spoke:

“Go request Miss Gladys to oblige us by coming to this room. You need not return, after.”

Austin McRustie was very pale as he stood eagerly watching the portal through which he expected his long-lost child to appear, but his suspense was not protracted. So quickly that it would seem as though she had been expecting some such summons, a young lady made her appearance, pausing irresolutely at the threshold, gazing from face to face.

“Gladys,” quickly and coldly said her reputed mother, “look at this person,” with a contemptuous gesture indicating the mine-owner. “He

says his name is Austin McRustie. He declares that *you* are *his* daughter, stolen from him by *Girl!*"

The mine-owner held out his arms, huskily crying as he did so:

"Myrtle—little kid! Have you forgotten daddy?"

With a low, glad cry the young woman sprung forward and into his arms, clinging tightly to him, even as she turned her face toward that now infuriated woman, while saying:

"Daddy! Daddy! Take me home, Daddy! I hate her—*now!*"

"Be careful, madam!" warned the detective, as his watchful eyes took note of the hand that crept to her bosom, the fingers clutching as though upon a weapon of some description. "The game is up, and you can only save yourself by acting sensibly."

"It is all wrong—all a mistake, I tell you!" cried the woman, still refusing to admit her defeat. "She is not— Gladys, girl?"

"Don't let her talk to me, Daddy!" clinging still closer to that more than willing support. "I used to love her, but now—I hate her, worse than rankest poison!"

"Gladys, you are mistaken, I say!" persisted the woman, but fearing to advance so long as that strong arm was held in readiness to bar her passage. "That man is *not* your father, for—*his child is dead!*"

"That's a lie, and you know it, Madame!" bluntly retorted McRustie. "Would she come to me like this, if she wasn't— Oh, my little kid! I feel as though I never cared to be nearer heaven than I am right now!"

"For the last time, Gladys Devereux; choose between that drunken or crazy brute, and me! Choose, I say! But remember what I can do if you choose the right course!"

"Right?" echoed Gladys, or Myrt'e, whichever the case might be, freeing herself from those loving arms and boldly confronting that still beautiful fury. "And she calls it *right*, Daddy! She calls it *right*, yet she is plotting to foist me off—"

"Silence, you silly fool!"

"I will not be silent! I'll tell everything—and she is trying to make believe I'm a baroness, or something—don't let her, Daddy!"

But it was German Gus who interposed, checking that tigress-like rush, pushing the woman back with an arm which she was powerless to resist. And just then, before more could be said or done, a sharp ring came from the front door, casting instant silence over all present.

Mrs. Devereux turned from red to white, and German Gus fancied he could distinguish a foreign oath in that sibilant breath which escaped her lips just then.

He was the first to break that brief silence, coolly saying:

"Shall I answer the bell, madam? You sent away the servant, and so—at least, permit me to bear you company?"

For Mrs. Devereux was moving toward the door which led into the hall, as though she meant to open the front portal in person.

It was a truly venomous glance which was shot him at this officiousness, but precious little cared he for that, just then. Above all else he was resolved not to lose sight of this woman until he saw fit to bring that interview to an end of his own volition.

He had no actual idea as to what was about to happen, but certain it is that he met with a disappointment; for when Mrs. Devereux opened the door, only a lad was discovered, who thrust an unsealed circular into her hand, then skurried away to distribute others of like sort.

Mrs. Devereux opened the envelope, gave the inclosure a single glance, then passed it over to the detective, with a mocking bow.

He saw that it meant nothing of importance, but neither man nor woman spoke, both moving back to the room which they had recently quitted in company.

They found the girl talking eagerly to her father, and that look of fierce hatred returned to Mrs. Devereux's face as she saw how hopeless was her chance of again exerting her evil influence over the girl on whose future she had built so many audacious plans.

"The jig is up, Madame, and you might as well climb down off your perch," bluntly cried McRustie as he, too, caught that vicious look. "I have found my little kid again, and that's all I care about. And you, honey-bird? I'm Daddy, sure enough!"

"Just as surely as that I'm *not* Gladys Devereux, but Myrtle McRustie," came the instant reply. "Oh, you needn't think to scare me out of that belief, moth—I mean *you!*" hastily correcting that slip of the tongue.

"Maybe I could have put up with the lost baroness business, although I knew it was a shameful fraud from start to finish, but when you—why, Daddy! She actually tried to force me into marrying that horrible monster, Eustace Reeves!"

Mrs. Devereux tried to check this impetuous flow of words by making angry gestures, but in vain. The girl was determined to have her say out, now she had fairly broken bonds, and her reputed mother was far too intensely angered to find use of her own tongue, just then.

Once more German Gus interfered as she would have sprung forward, to do what mad deed can only be guessed at, as yet. And then, in cold, measured tones he addressed her:

"Surely you begin to realize that your dangerous game is fairly lost, Giulia Raimando?"

With a low, choking sound she shrunk away from him, but he added in time to check the denial which was rising to her lips:

"Denial is useless, madam. Your thumbless hand convicts you, even if we lacked still other certain clews. You are indeed Giulia Raimando, once a favorite opera-singer, and once a favorite with Farquhar Beresford, Lord Lechmere, as well!"

"A lie! I never—are you all turned crazy, but me?" she hoarsely cried, still refusing to acknowledge the defeat which was surely hers.

But Gustave Lucksinger was pitiless now that his long and difficult trail was surely nearing its end. He wished to save possible trouble for the future by making this desperate woman realize just how surely the toils had been drawn about her, and in order to do this he rapidly but clearly gave a synopsis of her evil life.

There is no necessity for repeating it all in this connection, for that would be to go over much which has already been set down more in detail. Enough to say that her eventful career was pretty thoroughly ventilated for a space of some twenty years.

In bringing that history down to date, German Gus was forced to touch upon her connection with the McRusties, but he did this so adroitly that even Austin felt grateful to him—for his child's sake.

Of course the Go-lightly Detective was not permitted to say all this without interruption from Giulia Raimando, to give the woman the name to which, no doubt, she held the best claim; but he persisted through all, with cool deliberation, and long before he finished, Austin McRustie gave one low ejaculation of intense gratitude and relief.

Josephine Tudor, so-called, had a living husband when she married the wealthy mine-owner!

But German Gus was fated not to complete his arraignment, just then at least, for as he was about to bring in her connection with Eustace Reeves, and the plot to foist a false heiress upon the Lechmere estate, there came another sharp ring at the front door, this time quickly following the stoppage of a vehicle of some description.

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNDER FALSE COLORS.

ALTHOUGH Dick Ashton had resolved to give honest work in exchange for the money which the big-hearted, free-handed mine-owner had literally forced upon him that day, he could not quite bring himself to speak of the abducted milliner, Maggie Lester.

For one thing, he had no certain knowledge that she was connected with the case in which his old-time friend, Austin McRustie, was so powerfully interested; and for another, he felt that it would be basest treachery to his pal, Jockey Jem Cross, to ruin his scheme, whatever that might be.

A man does not grow converted all in a breath, and though Dick Ashton was really trying to get back to the safe side of the path, he had not yet become an actual saint.

After being so briefly dismissed by German Gus, the sport made his way back to the house where Mother Winkle was in charge, and where Maggie Lester was still held in captivity, greatly to that energetic little lady's indignant disgust.

Apparently no one was betraying anxiety or concern over her sudden flitting, although Dick Ashton, to set her mind at rest on one point, had visited that old tenement-house and learned that Rose Hollinger was none the worse for her share in that midnight adventure.

Poor Maggie hardly knew whether to laugh or to weep at this announcement, so she finally compromised on a little of both; the first for her friend, the last for her lack of friends.

Just how much of this leaning toward the right on Dick Ashton's part ought to be attributed to the influence which Maggie Lester almost unconsciously exercised, is not so easily determined. Certain it is, though, that the sport grew more and more ashamed of his recent life the more he saw of this little milliner.

Being a woman, Maggie was not blind to this influence, and quite naturally she sought to turn that to her own good. She kept her threats and scoldings for Mother Winkle, her smiles and her tears for the tall, comely sport, hoping in time to work upon his better nature until he would undo the evil work he had at least taken a hand in.

After leaving the Go-lightly Detective and his old-time friend, then, Dick Ashton returned to his present quarters, but avoided an interview with Maggie Lester for the time being. He had ample food for thought without any addition from her, sweet as her speech had grown in his ears of late days.

Mother Winkle seemed unusually good-natured that day, and instead of firing up hotly at his

first rebuff, returned again and again to the charge, until, more to get rid of her importunities than anything else, Dick Ashton finally consented to join her over a pot of beer.

As generally happens, one treat led to another, and almost before he knew it, Dick Ashton had crossed the danger-line, and was in a fair way of becoming drunken.

"Tis *you're* to blame for that, Mother Eve," he declared, with a low chuckle as he applied that title to the frowsy, anything-but-lovely representative of her sex. "Faith, then, if trouble comes of neglecting duty, 'tis Mother Devil will have to pay scot—and I'll twist that dirty neck of yours until it'll serve for a corkscrew, too!"

It was the odd blending of jest and earnest, mirth and ferocity, which really dangerous men will display under like circumstances; but Mother Winkle was an old stager herself, and betrayed neither fear nor anxiety.

Unless, indeed, that anxiety lay in coaxing Dick Ashton to swallow more of the evil brew.

It was far easier to yield, now, and long before the sun sunk to rest that evening, the sport was lying asleep, apparently bed-fast for the remainder of that night.

Mother Winkle had apparently kept pace with the man, glass for glass, but unless she had "played sojer" with marvelous skill, her head was a marvel of strength, her stomach a miracle of capacity. For she was able to assist the drunken sport to his cot, and having done this, could stand easily erect, laughing maliciously at the helpless being on whom she was gazing with more than a woman's scorn for a weakling.

Will wonders never cease?

Mother Winkle put her friendly side forward that day, even with the girl whom she had seemed to hate at sight; and although Maggie Lester just as openly betrayed her disgust and distrust, the woman would not take offense, laughing, jesting, coaxing, and offering Maggie a share of the good liquor which she appeared to find so relishable.

But there defeat met Mother Winkle, for Maggie disliked liquor only less than she disliked the woman who now pressed it upon her.

But even this rebuff was not sufficient to anger the wonderfully improved woman, and that sun went down upon her cracked voice actually singing a Methodist hymn!

Of course there was a reason for this remarkable change, and a glimpse of this was given not so very long after night had fairly settled down over the Lakeside City.

Mother Winkle was below-stairs, which was her customary post of duty ever since the coming of Maggie Lester under her charge. And if there had been any one near enough to take notes when that sharp rapping sounded at her front door, they might have wondered why this grim Cerberus should betray pleasure instead of wonder or anxiety at hearing such a peremptory summons.

Strange, too, that one placed in charge of such a valuable prize as Maggie Lester almost surely was—and one obtained after such irregular fashion—should betray such little caution in at once opening the portal, stepping back to make free passage for three sturdy fellows, and even closing the door behind their backs before asking:

"What's wanted, gents?"

"A fair look at your lodgers, for one thing," came the blunt reply. "Keep an eye on the old lady, Tom, and see that she doesn't try to come any tricks on travelers, will you?"

"I don't—by what right do you dare do this?" came a protest at last; but even then Mother Winkle was careful not to lift her gentle voice too high.

"By the right of law and justice!" sternly replied the spokesman, at the same time opening his coat to display a bright metal star. "We are officers, woman, come to investigate your ranch. Act sensible, and we'll treat you the same way. Cut up rusty, and you'll be run in on more charges than you'll care to answer for, unless my information is all wrong."

Mother Winkle meekly subsided, apparently having no answer in readiness; but at a sign from the self-styled officer of justice, she led the way up-stairs, and directly to the door of the chamber in which the little milliner was confined.

"She's in there," the woman whispered, softly. "In bed, of course. Hadn't I better go first, gents?"

"And that fellow—Ashton, isn't it?"

"Dead drunk, and I'd ought to have double pay for turning that trick, too! I thought he never would—"

"Stow your gab, and open the door!" rudely interrupted the fellow. "Or, just go first and help her dress. We're in too big a hurry for standing on ceremony, but I suppose the boss wouldn't like it if we lugged her along without covering!"

Mother Winkle obeyed without delay or demur, although her manner and face both altered as she met the startled gaze of Maggie Lester.

"Oh, it's come, just as I knew it would!" the treacherous bag began her acting once more. "The cops—the peelers are here, to set you free,

and they'll— Oh, my darling beauty! Tell 'em I've been your best and kindest friend ever since—"

"Lively, in yonder!" came a stern voice. "Bid the lady dress and come forth, for her friends are waiting to welcome her to liberty!"

"A lie, ye devils!" cried a hoarse, fierce voice from the rear. "It's a put-up job to— Lock your door, Maggie!"

Dick Ashton came with a rush, not so drunk but that he could smoke so palpable a trick, yet far too nearly intoxicated to do himself full justice in the hot struggle which instantly followed.

He fought hard and swift, but the odds were three to one, and that without counting the liquor which dulled his brain and unsteadied his nerves.

A fierce struggle while it lasted, but the power of numbers prevailed, and stunned by those pitiless blows, poor Dick Ashton fell to the floor, there to be clubbed while motion remained in his limbs!

While this unequal struggle was going on, Mother Winkle was not idle. Seeing that her cunning ruse had failed in part, she showed her real nature once more, springing upon Maggie and holding her helpless until masculine aid could come to her assistance.

Even then the mock police attempted to carry out their trick, and as an officer of the law enlisted by her friends to effect her release from captivity, the spokesman urged her to complete her toilet, adding:

"We have a task in waiting, miss, but there may be great danger in delay. This is not all of the evil gang, you want to understand."

The poor girl, bewildered by that abrupt awakening, and still further confused by that terrible struggle just without her door, obeyed that command, and then was hurried out of the building, into a close carriage, after which she was driven swiftly off through the night.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A SCHEMER'S LAST STAKE.

Two of those pretended officers were inside the carriage with the frightened girl, but they had very little to say in answer to the many questions with which she pelted them.

"We are acting on behalf of your best friends," she was assured. "If we move a bit under cover, so to speak, that is entirely for your own good. Surely you would not have an open scandal, such as the newspapers would surely make of this, if the reporters caught on?"

The very vagueness of this hint helped quiet Maggie, but it was with a fast-beating heart that she alighted from the carriage when it came to a halt before a building which she failed to recognize.

Had there been any other people in sight, just then, it is rather more than possible that she might have called a halt for the purpose of learning more clearly just what prospect was before her; but the retired street was deserted by all save their own little party, and the officers hurried her across the pave and up to the door of that building, the portal of which immediately swung open to give them admittance.

One who certainly bore slight resemblance to an ordinary servant received them, and at once conducting Maggie Lester to a neatly-furnished room on that same floor, bade her wait patiently until he could return.

He hastened back to the door, whispering a few words with the pretended officers, then gave their spokesman some money, after which they took their departure, leaving their employer to face his intended victim, once more.

Maggie Lester was still standing when Eustace Reeves entered that room, a smile upon his face which was intended to be reassuring, but which, to the contrary, only added to the fright which was already assailing the poor, friendless girl.

"Oh, sir, where am I? What does this mean? I never saw you before, yet those men assured me I was being taken back to my friends!"

"They told you true, my child, for I am ready to prove myself your very best friend," declared the schemer, taking her hands despite her feeble resistance, leading her to a chair, into which she was placed, with gentle force.

"Then—take me back to my home! Take me to Rose, or— Don't!" as that smiling face came nearer her own. "You—you frighten me!"

"And yet my dearest wish in life is to make you supremely happy, Berenice," softly murmured the arch-schemer.

"I'm not—my name is Maggie Lester, sir! You surely have made a mistake, and now—I'm not Berenice—you'll let me go—free?"

"You doubtless believe that your right name is Maggie Lester, but if you'll only hear me through, my dear child, I can and will convince you that your name is really Berenice Beresford."

Eustace Reeves spoke so gently, smiled so blandly, that Maggie began to rally her courage, and a look of dawning curiosity came into her big blue eyes as she gazed into his face.

The lawyer gave an inward chuckle at this, for he regarded it as a token of coming suc-

cess, but he was far too shrewd to alarm his prey through too abrupt movements, and in much the same purring tone of voice he added:

"Is it so hard to believe, little girl? Yet 'tis Gospel truth! You are not Maggie Lester. You are— Suppose I were to say I could not only restore to you a rightful name, but an enormous fortune as well?"

"How can that be, sir?" asked the bewildered girl. "I am poor. My parents were poor, as were all their kindred. So—how can that be?"

"Your reputed parents, say," swiftly amended the lawyer. "Those you once called parents were really of no kin, and—"

But Maggie drew back, freeing her hand with an angry jerk at this.

"Now I know you are—that it is all a mistake!" she cried, just managing to clip off that too-strong term, substituting another, less sonorous as well as less truthful. "My mother—not my mother! Oh, I'll never, never believe such a falsehood, sir!"

"Not even if I prove that seeming falsehood to be Gospel truth?"

"No, for that can't be done, sir!"

"It surely can, my child," his tones growing a less soft as his anger began to rise. "But, whether or no that truth is ever made clear to all the world, as well as to yourself, depends entirely upon how you receive what I am about to tell you."

"Wait," checking the girl with an imperious gesture. "Hear me to an end before you say more. Hear all that I have brought you here to learn, and then reflect well before you decide. It means even more than great wealth and high honor to you, child, believe me."

His manner, even more than his words, served to awe Maggie to some extent, and though she still regarded him with mingled dread and suspicion, she remained silent, waiting for what more was to come.

After a brief pause, during which Eustace Reeves seemed inwardly debating with himself just how much it was wise to communicate as a starter, he spoke again:

"On my sacred word of honor, child, all I have told you so far is nothing more than Gospel truth! Your real name is Berenice Beresford, and you are heiress to a great fortune and a still greater name. Instead of being a poor working-girl, you should be among your equals, of high rank and proud possessions."

"Have you ever asked yourself why it was that you were abducted in such a manner, last week? Would so much risk be run merely on account of a penniless milliner apprentice?"

"I didn't—they told me—"stammered Maggie, blushing.

"That a rich lover hired them?" suggested Reeves, with an ugly sneer curling his lip for an instant. "They lied, of course, my child. You were stolen away simply to keep me from discovering you."

"For years I have been engaged in this quest. I have spent both time and money without stint, and why? For one thing, of course, to reap a rich reward in the end, but is that unnatural? Surely I ought not to give my time for nothing, yet be money out of pocket as well?"

"No, sir, but I can't—it all seems so impossible!"

"Yet, I can prove every word I have told you, my child," repeated the lawyer, congratulating himself on his promising success so far. "I can restore you the name of which you were robbed when nothing more than a toddling infant! I can give you a great fortune, and I can make you a lady of title, as well!"

"You shrink away as though I was threatening you with terrible misfortunes in place of rich blessings, child!" Eustace Reeves laughed. "Is this such a terrible prospect, then?"

"It can't be true, though!" with a return of her former spirit. "I know there is some strange mistake in it all! Why, sir, if true, what would that make my dear mother, my dear father, too?"

"They were not the guilty ones, child," assured the lawyer. "They had nothing whatever to do with kidnapping you, although they did take money as the price of their care after—"

"Take money for me? I'll never believe it, sir!"

"You must believe it, or else remain what you are now for the rest of your life: poor, hard-working, friendless as—"

"I'm not afraid of even that, sir," proudly drawing her diminutive figure erect and looking him squarely in the eyes. "But you are taking entirely too much for granted. I am not friendless, and—"

"Surely you are not friendless, since I am here to befriend you," came the swift interruption. "I can change all this, and I stand ready to replace you in your rightful station—on certain conditions!"

Then the girl's red lips began to curl. For the first time that plausible mask dropped, and she could see something of what lay behind it: a crafty, covetous schemer!

Eustace Reeves frowned a bit, for he had not given Maggie credit for so much native shrewdness. Still, the revelation must have come sooner or later, so why not at once?

"Of course I cannot afford to give all for nothing, my dear," he said, with seeming frankness. "I have already expended a modest fortune in trying to discover the rich heiress I can prove you to be. I am merely a man with a fair share of man's weaknesses."

"Now, listen a bit longer, and mark well my words, child."

"I will prove you the long-lost heiress. I will be the means of restoring you to a title, as well. All this I will do, paying everything and doing everything; but of course I expect my reward for all this."

"And that reward is—just what?"

"That you share your wonderful fortune with the one who made it possible," came the instant response. "So far, I have labored for a perfect stranger. From this time on, let me labor for a relative!"

"I don't—how can that be, sir?" faltered the girl, now once more thoroughly bewildered.

"A relative through marriage I ought to have said, perhaps," with a low, amused chuckle, but keenly watching the effect of his words upon the girl. "In other words, promise me, on honor, that you will marry me of your own free will, or—"

"Are you crazy, man?" cried Maggie, springing to her feet in hot indignation as she gazed into his slowly rising face. "Marry you? I'd rather—why, I'd die first!"

She so positively meant just what passed her lips, that Eustace Reeves could no longer doubt, and in fierce rage he cried in turn:

"Then you shall die, and in wretched poverty, as you have lived!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TIGRESS AT BAY.

GUSTAVE LUCKSINGER was looking squarely at the face of the woman whose black record he was so pitilessly laying bare, and as that swift roll of wheels came nearer, to suddenly cease directly in front of that very building, he caught an evanescent gleam as though a spark of fire had shot from each of those black eyes.

Shrewd and quick of intuition though the Go-lightly Detective undeniably was, even he might easily have missed that tell-tale gleam, or, having caught it, been unable to give it the correct interpretation, had it not been for what had gone before.

He felt morally certain Mrs. Devereux was expecting a caller of importance, either as regards himself or the news he was to fetch, and as that sharp summons came to their ears, he felt convinced that caller was now close at hand.

He waited for a bit to see what the Madame would say or do, but that was almost nothing. Her lids dropped, her fingers closed: nothing more!

That impatient ring was repeated, and then the woman lifted her lids, looking toward the door rather than at the detective, saying:

"You heard me send the servant away, sir. I am going to answer that ring."

"Pray permit me to spare you that trouble, my dear madam," politely said Lucksinger, at the same time moving toward the door which led into the hall. "If it is of any greater importance than the other, of course, I will notify you without delay."

Mrs. Devereux made no attempt to check that speech, but she moved forward as well, and as the detective opened that door she swiftly sprung through, to reach the front entrance in another instant.

But German Gus was beside her before she could lay hand to the fastenings, and with a stern grip closing upon her right wrist, he muttered, in warning tone:

"Are you so anxious for a scene, madam? If not—please allow me to play servant, for once in my life."

Without waiting for a reply, Gustave Lucksinger turned the knob and opened the door, his broad, burly figure almost entirely screening that elegantly garbed figure at his left elbow.

A man was standing on the steps, and the hurried manner in which he spoke told something of his great impatience:

"The lady—must see her, for—"

"Step inside, please, sir," quickly interrupted German Gus, opening the door a bit wider, and with a deft movement of his own figure pushing that of the woman still further back and aside.

Had the fellow been less deeply interested, perhaps he might have foiled that bold trick without thinking of such a thing, but, as the supposed servant moved so did he, and then the door brushed past his skirts in closing.

"My lady—a gentleman who wishes a personal interview," gravely announced the Go-lightly Detective, the sentence rolling over his tongue as smoothly as though he had been born and bred an usher.

As he spoke, his eyes met those of Mrs. Devereux. From hers flashed a vicious hatred that meant death if ever the power should come into her hands. And yet, nevertheless, both her face and eyes showed that in this cool, prompt-acting man she had at last met one she must acknowledge her master.

The man whom Lucksinger had admitted,

showed something of surprise at his reception, but then he hastily began:

"I've turned the trick, ma'am, and you can—"

"Shall I fetch a couple of chairs, madam, or will the gentlemen go with you to the drawing-room?" blandly asked the detective, just in time to check the words rising in her throat.

Another vicious glare, brief but deadly, and then Mrs. Devereux acknowledged her defeat, coldly saying:

"You are right, Mr. Lucksinger, and I am obliged to you for your gentle hint. Follow me, please—both!"

The caller gave a start at that name, and his bronzed face surely lost a shade or two of color as he looked toward that figure, now leaning in seeming carelessness against the closed door.

He, himself, was an ordinary enough looking personage, just such as may be met at almost any turn in a great city; neither a workingman nor a lounging, but a sort of cross between the two.

His face showed strength of character, but there was a subtle, undefined something in his looks which told of crafty if not of crooked ways.

German Gus smiled blandly in answer to that startled look, and when he spoke, it was with rather more authority than a servant would have assumed in the presence of his mistress.

"Madame invites you into the drawing-room, sir; you certainly will not force her to repeat that invitation?"

"I don't—I don't—"

"Oblige me, please," coldly interrupted Mrs. Devereux, then glided away to the other door.

Plainly far from feeling at ease, the fellow followed after, with Lucksinger bringing up the rear.

He paused again as he saw that still other persons were in that room, but German Gus deftly moved him across the threshold by the simple process of advancing himself, sweeping the passageway clear.

Lucksinger closed the door behind them all, then blandly said:

"Pay no attention to the rest of us, I beg, Mrs. Devereux. Just consider that we are as not—isn't that easy?"

The woman paid no attention to him, just then. She was gazing at this unexpected messenger like one striving to read his news through his face. But that medium proved a very imperfect one, just then.

The fellow was clearly ill at ease. This reception was far from being the one he had expected, and he was at a loss how to interpret the part being played by this Lucksinger.

"Shall I question the gentleman in your place, madam?" still more blandly asked the Go-lightly Detective. "If I can spare you even so slight a trouble, I would be fairly delighted!"

"You are entirely *too* kind, Mr. Lucksinger. I will not trouble you, for the matter interests only myself. So—your report, sir?"

"Before these?" hesitated the fellow, awkwardly.

"Yes! I command you! What brings you here in such haste?"

"Well, since you say so, all right! I saw a girl taken to his house, in a closed hack, not more than an hour ago!"

"A girl? You are sure? To his house, man?" almost breathlessly panted the woman, although she was striving to conceal her strong emotions.

"I am sure. I saw him open the door, and take the girl inside. And I saw her face, too! She's a little milliner, who works—"

"That will do, my good man," interrupted Mrs. Devereux, at the same time producing a little roll of bills, which she thrust into the fellow's hand. "Take this—your pay—count it, if you like. I am going—to my room, for a few moments!"

Although German Gus could see that this communication possessed an intense interest for the woman, he was not prepared for such swift and decided action as Mrs. Devereux took, even while those last words were warm upon her lips.

She sprung to the door, jerked it open, then slammed it shut behind her, all so rapidly that even the agile detective was powerless to arrest her steps.

He sprung after, but by the time he gained the hallway, she was in the act of springing through the front doorway, and as the heavy portal closed behind her, his keen ears distinctly caught the sharp snap of a key turning in its wards, or else a spring-lock operating!

He grasped the brass knob and turned it, trying to wrench the door open, in vain. Twice more, without success; and then he heard the trampling of hoofs and the rattle of wheels in front of the dwelling!

With a cry that was pretty nearly an oath, German Gus sprung back to the other door, thrusting aside those who had moved toward it in their surprise, crying out as he leaped toward the window with its lace curtains and inside blinds:

"Devil to pay, McRustie! She's off—on four legs! Follow, for there'll be murder done unless—"

His further words were drowned by the clash and clatter made by tearing open those blinds and flinging up the weighted sash. And then the Go-lightly Detective leaped through the window, even while shooting through the air, casting a keen glance in search of the desperate woman who bade fair to foil his carefully-laid plans, even yet!

He caught sight of a single buggy dashing recklessly up the street, and though he could not make out the form of the driver, that was hardly necessary.

There was no other vehicle in sight, and with that one exception the street along there was deserted.

"It's the Madame, safe enough!" was his reflection as he recovered from the shock of his leap, striking the pavement at his rebound, then dashing into the street as affording him the best running. "And off to settle accounts with Reeves, or I'm an idiot!"

He quickly lost sight of the buggy, but feeling sure he had rightly guessed its destination, German Gus raced on at top speed, hoping that he might be in time to hinder a tragedy, even yet.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW IT ALL ENDED.

As the Go-lightly Detective reached the corner around which he had seen that buggy whirr so recklessly, he caught sounds of rapid footfalls behind him, and casting a look back, he recognized the muscular figure of Austin McRustie in hot pursuit.

The mine-owner proved himself a marvel at a sprint, for German Gus hardly slackened his pace, yet he was gradually overhauled, and ere long was able to catch the panting words:

"Which way, and where to, pardner?"

"Making for Reeves, dead sure! She'll kill him, unless—"

"Or he'll kill her! Lay it down, pardner!" hoarsely panted McRustie, as he put on another spurt which brought him fairly abreast the Go-lightly Detective.

But with all his efforts he could not gain another inch, and like a team under yoke, the two men raced along through the night, heading as directly as possible for the residence of Lawyer Reeves.

Not another word was spoken between them, for breath was far too precious, just then. Yet German Gus was wondering what McRustie had done with the fellow who brought that message, and how the father had heart to abandon his newly-recovered daughter so abruptly.

Fortunately for the friends that part of the city was unusually quiet, for if a policeman had noticed their swift flight, he certainly would have deemed it his duty to check them, and the loss of even a single minute now might mean a loss which could never be retrieved.

Luckily, too, no very considerable distance lay between those two residences, and so rapidly did the pedestrians cover the ground that they turned their last corner, just in time to see the buggy draw up to the curb, only a little more than four squares ahead.

"Look!" pantingly exclaimed Lucksinger, as he sighted a phantom-like figure leave the vehicle and flit across the pavement to the building. "And—look at that!"

The last exclamation was drawn forth by seeing the horse, no doubt smarting under the lash already applied, dash madly away and up the street, rushing to death or ruin!

"Durn the critter—her!" panted McRustie, in turn, then letting out another link of speed, although he had been racing as fast as he thought was possible.

Side by side the two men reached their goal, and side by side they were when they sprung through the open door, into the entry. Then—a sharp, terrified shriek came from a room just off that hall!"

They leaped forward, and then a slight figure sprung from the room with cries of terror, coming into violent contact with German Gus, and only saved from a dangerous recoil by his ready arms.

It was Maggie Lester, fleeing from death!

That brief check permitted Austin McRustie to reach the room first of the two men, and a cry of horror broke from his lips as he took in that scene: a woman, bending over a prostrate figure, striking at his already gory breast with a dagger from which red drops were flying!

"Joe—you tigress!" hoarsely cried the mine-owner.

That blow fell, it was already on the way, but with marvelous quickness the woman jerked forth her bloody weapon, then sprung across the room, turning as though at bay.

She recognized the man who had once called her wife, and in the same instant she caught sight of the Go-lightly Detective approaching, with that fair girl in his arms!

She knew that her desperate game was lost beyond redemption, and with a wild, almost insane laugh, she lifted that bloody weapon above her own bosom, crying aloud:

"I'm beaten, but I'll cheat you—thus!"

With a hoarse cry Austin McRustie leaped over that bleeding shape lying near the center of

the room, and strove to check that other blow—but in vain!

He caught the form of Giulia Raimando in his arms, but the sharp-pointed blade had already touched her heart!

Investigation proved that the single stroke had resulted in death, but it was long ere Austin McRustie would permit this truth to enter his brain or his heart. In those fearful moments something of his old love had been born again, and when, at last, he gently lowered that lifeless form to the carpet which bore terrible stains from her heart, his blanched lips almost reverently touched hers, and more than one honest tear dampened her still beautiful face.

Meanwhile German Gus was not idle. When fully satisfied that the woman was past earthly aid, he turned to Eustace Reeves, giving him such care as lay in mortal power.

Although the one stroke had sufficed to end the earthly career of the woman, the lawyer had received nearly a score deep and ghastly wounds without bringing death.

Still, German Gus knew that death was but a matter of time, and that Eustace Reeves could hardly survive the night, while any minute might bring the end.

Knowing this, he lost as little time as possible, summoning the chief of police and a surgeon, then taking full charge of the house until he could resign control to the authorities.

Long before the day dawned, the soul of Eustace Reeves had gone to its last account, but he lived long enough to answer some important questions, and to declare that Maggie Lester was none other than Berenice Beresford, the long-lost baroness!

He told something of the double game which he had played, and which had brought about his death. He swore that Mrs. Gwendolyn Devereux was none other than the ex-opera singer, Giulia Raimando, who had lost her left thumb in the fierce struggle for life which Lord Lechmere made against her vicious assault upon his life, at Lechmere Hall.

He told where might be found the proofs which he had so laboriously collected, some of which fixed crime upon Giulia Raimando, others proving the identity of Maggie Lester with the lost baroness.

He made full confession, too, of his treacherous assault upon Jockey Jem Cross, as well as his later attempt to remove that dangerous witness by poison.

Knowing that death was inevitable, the surgeon, in charge, did not scruple to administer powerful stimulants for the purpose of keeping up the lawyer's strength until he could make full confession, and then attest the correctness of the written statement which the hand of German Gus swiftly indited, word by word as it came from those beat-blanch lips.

After this was completed, Eustace Reeves sunk into a stupor which lasted until death claimed his own!

Austin McRustie caused the body of her whom he had once lived with in such bliss, to be interred in good style, and that misguided woman had one, if not two, sincere mourners that day.

Terribly though she had sinned, time had been when she was a loving wife and indulgent mother; both Austin McRustie and Myrtle let sincere tears fall over that grave, and many long months passed before the dark shadows finally left their faces.

Long before this, however, they had bidden the Go-lightly Detective a cordial farewell, turning their backs upon the Lake City, going back to their western home, where still brighter days were in store for them both.

Dick Ashton, recovered from his terrible beating, bore them company.

McRustie held strong faith in his old comrade, and in the end this faith was fully justified. Dick Ashton became John Hardress when once himself again, and to-day is a respected citizen, with wife and children to help him "fight the good fight!"

Jockey Jem Cross never fully rallied from his injuries, and was buried at the expense of the city. Perhaps 'twas best so, since he must have lived an idiot, if life had been granted him, the surgeons finally decided.

Mother Winkle vanished when the grand explosion came, but doubtless she met a fitting reward for her treachery.

And the lost baroness? Was taken to England by German Gus, who at length succeeded in restoring her to all her rights.

And the Go-lightly Detective?

Never pursued that profession, after. Why should he, when he became the happy husband of a rich and titled bride?

But that was not until after "Maggie Lester" was securely installed at Lechmere Hall, and it might not have come to pass, even then, had not—but let German Gus say it, himself:

"Uff dot leedle working-kirl she didn't make dose bobbing der kevestion her own selluff! I vhas two pig a gowart py mein zell—und dot is schust like a gosbel piple-pook! Eh, leedle vife, gal?"

THE END.

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